

INVESTIGATING HOW THE UNEXPECTEDNESS OF A DEATH AFFECTS THE  
SEVERITY OF GRIEF: A SCOPING REVIEW

By

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## **Abstract**

There is a knowledge gap in grief literature regarding unexpectedness (the perception of unpreparedness for the death of a loved one) being predictive of higher grief severity during bereavement. Many studies that researched grief severity during the COVID-19 pandemic included or found the factor of unexpectedness to be significant. The aims of this scoping review are to discover if the findings of the published literature can conclude that unexpectedness is predictive of higher levels of grief, and if it is a significant factor related to greater bereavement distress from the loss of a loved one due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the databases PubMed and PsycInfo, sources were collected and screened for their eligibility to be included in this study. The findings of each study were then extracted based on their relevance, organized, then synthesized. The synthesis of findings can conclude that the unexpectedness of a death is predictive of acute grief and a risk factor for prolonged grief, and that it is a significant factor associated with greater bereavement distress during a pandemic. Experiencing what is perceived to be an unexpected death can predict more severe grief experiences.

## **Introduction**

Grief, as defined as sorrow caused by the death of a loved one, can be an extremely complex and mentally straining process to go through. A preliminary search for existing literature has been conducted and found that “debate in the literature exists as to whether unexpectedness [of the death of a loved one experienced by a bereaved individual] causes greater bereavement distress and whether it is predictive of [grief severity]” (O’Connor, 2014). The present study utilized literature that researched grief during the COVID-19 pandemic as many of these studies included a measure and/or finding related to the effects of expectedness on grief severity. Learning of causes and predictors of greater grief severity can aid bereaved individuals in gaining insight into

how severe their grief is and why, as well as how to approach treatment methods for their grief. For the purposes of this study, expectedness is defined as the perception of the bereaved individual regarding their preparedness for the death they have experienced. For a death to be unexpected, studies usually operationalize this perception as knowing of a loved one's impending death for less than one week. Suddenness was also investigated for this study, because although it describes the event of the death itself and usually has to do with the trajectory of health, it can signify the unexpectedness of the death. For this study, grief is categorized as either acute or prolonged grief. Acute grief is the instinctive response to loss that is characterized by distress that can be all-encompassing but is the natural path of grief that leads to healing. Prolonged grief disorder (PGD) differs from acute grief in the way that it is the severe, chronic bereavement experience that results from complications in grieving. This study explores the research question: Is the unexpectedness of a death predictive of acute or prolonged grief and is it associated with greater bereavement distress during a pandemic? This study conducts a synthesis of the findings from published literature concerning the significance of unexpectedness or suddenness regarding the severity of grief experienced.

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## **Methods**

### *Protocol*

At the launch of the study, it was decided that all the literature to be used would be published and found on the databases PubMed and PsychInfo. The search terms used to find eligible sources

were: grief, unexpected death, expected death, prolonged grief, complicated grief, suddenness of death, and pandemic grief.

### *Eligibility criteria*

For a source to be eligible for inclusion in this literature review, it must have been published within the last 20 years and written or translated into English. Each source's study must have involved bereavement due to the constant variable of this study being the loss of a loved one to death. Some significance of unexpectedness and/or suddenness as well as a measure of grief severity must also be included in a source to ensure that the research question of this study is answered, as the purpose of this study is to discover the findings in the literature regarding the effects of expectedness on grief severity.

### *Search strategy*

Sources were searched for through the University of Arizona (UA) Online Library using the established search terms with the following filters applied: Full Text Online to ensure that all results from searching for sources would be fully accessible, Peer-reviewed/Scholarly Resources to ensure that all sources would be credible, Publication Date: 2003-2023 to limit outdated sources, Articles for the purpose of this study researching published scientific articles, and English Language to ensure that all sources were written in or translated into English for the researchers' understanding. PubMed and PsycInfo have similar settings for the search filters that could be applied to search for sources directly through their databases, but the UA Online Library's search results include many of the same articles. For each search term, there are hundreds and sometimes thousands of results. Only around the first 50 article titles in the search results were screened for each of the seven search terms, and titles that seemed to meet this study's eligibility criteria were recorded for further screening. Each of these articles titles were

related to grief severity, and stored on a software called Zotero for collecting and organizing sources.

### *Data extraction*

Each article screened from its title was then investigated based on the content of their abstracts and were also searched for their ability to meet this study's eligibility criteria. The abstract revealed whether the study measured grief severity; if they did not, then they were removed from eligibility. If the abstract revealed a measure or finding related to suddenness or expectedness, then it was recorded that it would most likely be a very useful source. If the abstract revealed a measure of grief severity, but no mention of suddenness or expectedness, then the article would be further screened for eligibility. If an article in its entirety had no mention of the perception of bereaved people regarding the expectedness or suddenness of the death, then they were deemed ineligible to be included for this study. Each article eligible based on its abstract was screened specifically utilizing a keyboard shortcut that highlights keywords and phrases when searched for in order to find terms within the article that would denote eligibility, such as: expect, sudden, perception/perceive, experience, grief, acute, prolonged/PG/PGD, chronic, operationalize, measure. Each of these helped to decipher whether an article included measures and/or findings related to expectedness, suddenness, and specific or general grief severity. Some sources had to be removed from eligibility due to a removal of access to the full article during the conduction of this study. The entire screening process was conducted independently.

### *Data charting*

Evidence from sources was selected based on the established eligibility criteria, utilizing the search for related keywords and phrases. Relevant quotes from each source were documented in a Google Doc and highlighted for the color-coding of different variables and findings. This

organization process was rather successful, but it may have been more comprehensible to have been charted in tables separating the measures, findings, and other variables for each source. The data was charted independently by highlighting each relevant variable in a specific color for the data pulled from each included source.

### *Data summary*

The variables searched for in this study stem from the eligibility criteria. Perhaps the most significant is the unexpectedness or the suddenness of the death experienced, which would be the independent, operationalized variable having to do with the perception of the bereaved individual (expectedness), which can be surmised from analyzing the events surrounding the death (suddenness). The grief severity of the bereaved individual would be the dependent, measured variable, and for the purposes of this study, is usually categorized as acute or prolonged grief. Bereavement is the constant, controlled variable, as there must be grief to measure in the study. Another significant variable in the majority of the included sources is the factor of living in a pandemic, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence was synthesized by comparing the findings of all included sources and deciphering whether it could be concluded that unexpectedness is a significant factor in increasing grief severity, especially regarding whether the grief is specifically acute or prolonged. If expectedness or unexpectedness was not explicitly stated, suddenness was investigated in a source to determine if it could be related to the perception of the bereaved people. Each point of evidence will be presented and synthesized narratively, and all relevant outcomes data will be presented in a table.

### **Results**

A total of 21 sources were eligible for this study with 6 sources published before the COVID-19 pandemic and 15 sources related to COVID-19 grief research. A total of four sources were

removed from eligibility after passing through the title and abstract screening process, as the full text screening process revealed that they either did not measure grief, were completely unrelated to unexpectedness or suddenness, or had been removed from access through this study's selected databases. Six sources are literature reviews that synthesized findings from published literature. Most sources measured expectedness through asking participants a question or questions about their perception of the loss and the events surrounding the death. O'Connor et al. (2014) operationalized unexpectedness as knowing of the impending death for less than one week, and noted that debate in the literature exists as to whether unexpectedness causes greater bereavement distress and whether it is predictive of PG or acute grief, which is the knowledge gap that the present study aims to address. The relevant information from each eligible study is included in Table 1 (below).

**Table 1.** Eligible Studies Evaluating the Effects of Expectedness on Grief Severity

| Study                  | Study Design      | Sample Size, <i>n</i> (Bereaved) | Measure of Expectedness/Suddenness   | Measure of Grief Severity                             | COVID-19 Pandemic Study | Relevant Findings   |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------|---|
| Currier et al. (2006)  | Cross-sectional   | <i>n</i> = 1,056                 | Questionnaire (sense-making and circumstances surrounding loss)                            | The Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG)              | No                      | The sense-making of the bereaved is the critical pathway to [prolonged grief] rather than the objective cause of death (violent or natural).                                    |
| Ott et al. (2007)      | Longitudinal      | <i>n</i> = 141                   | 7-point scale, five questions from the Nature of the Death Instrument (Barry et al., 2002) | 5-point scale, nine questions from the ICG-R proposed | No                      | Experiencing unexpected death can increase risk of chronic grief among individuals with low self-esteem.  |
| Nakajima et al. (2012) | Literature Review | N/A                              | Synthesis of literature findings   | CBI, PG-13, ICG, SI-TG, German ICG-R                  | No                      | A lack of perceived preparedness for death was associated with severity of [PG] (Barry et al.). Suddenness and lack of readiness for death were reported as predictors of [PG]. |

**Table 1.** (Continued)

|                                   |                 |                  |  |   |     |  |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|--|---|-----|--|
| Utz et al. (2012)                 | Longitudinal    | <i>n</i> = 328   | Dummy variable called "expectedness of death" (0 = not expected; 1 = expected)                                     | The "Present Feelings" subscale of the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG)        | No  | Poor physical health of bereaved at time of widowhood associated with risk of [PG]; interventions could be targeted at this population even prior to the loss in cases of expected death.  |
| O'Connor et al. (2014)            | Cross-sectional | <i>n</i> = 36    | Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), the UCLA Loneliness Scale, and the revised Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS-R) | ICG, Impact of Events Scale (IES), and the Yearning in Situations of Loss (YSL) Scale | No  | Unexpected deaths (knowing of the impending death for less than one week) were not significantly different between [PG] and [acute grief] (p-value: 0.48).   |
| Boelen (2015)                     | Cross-sectional | <i>n</i> = 265   | Single item questionnaire rated on a 5-point scale   | The Prolonged Grief Disorder Scale  | No  | Greater perceived unexpectedness positively, significantly associated w elevated PGD severity+PTSD severity.   |
| Breen et al. (2021)               | Cross-sectional | <i>n</i> = 409   | The Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale-Short Form ([ISLES-SF])  | Pandemic Grief Scale (PGS), Pandemic Grief Risk Factors (PGRF)                        | Yes | COVID-19 related bereaved participants reported significantly higher acute grief than those mourning natural deaths and comparable to non-natural death related grief.   |
| Şimşek Arslan & Buldukoğlu (2021) | Cross-sectional | <i>n</i> = 114   | Questionnaire (Personal Information Form)  | Mourning Scale  | Yes | A statistically significant relationship was found between expectedness of death and grief reactions ( $p < .05$ ). Unexpected death caused more grief reactions than expected death. Expectedness of death predicts the total score of the Mourning Scale negatively and significantly ( $\beta = -.18$ , $t(111) = -2.08$ , $p < .05$ , $pr^2 = .03$ ) |
| Eisma & Tamminga (2022)           | Cross-sectional | <i>n</i> = 1,266 | Self-report measures   | The Traumatic Grief Inventory Self Report Plus (TGI-SR+)                              | Yes | COVID-19 deaths yielded higher grief levels than natural deaths (but not unnatural deaths). Expectedness of the death and the inability to say goodbye appropriately explained this effect.  |

**Table 1. (Continued)**

|                              |                          |                |                                  |                                     |     |  |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----|--|
| Mitima-Verloop et al. (2022) | Cross-sectional          | <i>n</i> = 232 | Questionnaire                    | TGI-SR                              | Yes | Symptom levels of PG were especially high among those bereaved after an unexpected death (including COVID-19) and those having had a close relationship to the deceased.   |
| Selman et al. (2022)         | Longitudinal             | <i>n</i> = 711 | Questionnaire                    | Adult Attitude to Grief (AAG) scale | Yes | Those who did not expect their loved one to die demonstrated higher levels of grief and also support needs (often: $p < 0.001$ via t-tests), although this was not significant in the mixed model ( $p = 0.089$ ).                           |
| Amador et al. (2023)         | Literature Review        | N/A            | Screening for keywords/phrases   | Screening for keywords/phrases      | Yes | Unexpected death was almost universally expressed by bereaved family members, stemming not just from the suddenness of deaths but also from their prematureness. Lack of closure surrounding a death contributes to a heightened risk of PG. |
| Asgari et al. (2023)         | Cross-sectional          | <i>n</i> = 15  | Semi-structured interview        | Semi-structured interview           | Yes | The bereaved showed that they experienced a feeling of confusion and lack of control over the loss. Bereaved family members may show PG symptoms due to feelings of helplessness during bereavement due to COVID-19.                         |
| Eisma & Boelen (2023)        | Literature Review Letter | N/A            | Synthesis of literature findings | Synthesis of literature findings    | Yes | The unexpected nature of COVID-19 deaths explained the differences in acute grief levels between people who experienced COVID-19 deaths versus natural deaths. Unexpectedness of death due to COVID-19 appears to be a risk factor for PG.   |

**Table 1. (Continued)**

|                         |                   |                |                                  |                                  |     |  |
|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----|--|
| Hanauer et al. (2023)   | Cross-sectional   | <i>n</i> = 93  | Questionnaire                    | Questionnaire                    | Yes | Risk factors that have been identified include among others sudden or unexpected deaths, and feeling that the death was preventable.   |
| Kumar (2023)            | Literature Review | N/A            | Synthesis of literature findings | Synthesis of literature findings | Yes | Sudden, unexpected, preventable death is a risk factor for developing or intensifying PG. Traumatic level of stress has been found to be more significant than the unexpectedness of death for the severity of grief responses. However, expectedness of death is found as an essential distinguishing factor for grief resulting from COVID death and natural causes. |
| Kustanti et al. (2023)  | Literature Review | N/A            | Synthesis of literature findings | PGS, GIS, AAG, IPGDS, ICG, ICG-R | Yes | Previous meta-analyses have indicated a high frequency of grief disorder among adults and unexpected-related loss. The rapidity of the death due to COVID-19 may share similar structures with grief related to other unexpected-related deaths. The cause of death was a robust predictor of PG.  |
| Schneider et al. (2023) | Cross-sectional   | <i>n</i> = 196 | PGRF Questionnaire               | PGD-12                           | Yes | Individuals bereaved due to a sudden and unexpected death have reported significantly higher rates of PG. Traumatic losses and violent causes of death are associated with negative bereavement outcomes, including a greater risk for PG symptoms, compared to natural causes of death.   |

**Table 1. (Continued)**

|                                |                   |                |                                  |   |     |  |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|---|-----|--|
| Sirrine et al. (2023)          | Cross-sectional   | <i>n</i> = 162 | Reactions to Loss Scale (RTL)    | RTL   | Yes | Students who experienced more losses also reported more negative coping reactions, including avoidance and loss of control. Individuals who experienced multiple losses at once often took longer to progress through their grief. |
| Sola et al. (2023)             | Literature Review | N/A            | Synthesis of literature findings | Synthesis of literature findings                  | Yes | The pandemic significantly affected grief experiences, as it created unexpected situations. The moments before and after death are permeated by suffering arising from situations of abandonment and isolation.                    |
| von Blanckenburg et al. (2023) | Cross-sectional   | <i>n</i> = 142 | Questionnaire (5-point scale)    | German ICG, Utrecht Grief Rumination Scale (UGRS) | Yes | Found no differences in grief severity between COVID-19 deaths and other causes of death. Association between higher levels of PG and loss of a loved one to COVID-19 can be explained by the unexpectedness of the loss.          |

### *Unexpectedness*

A total of 14 sources found specifically that greater perceived unexpectedness was associated with elevated PG severity or higher grief levels (Ott et al. (2007), Utz et al. (2012), Boelen (2015), Şimşek Arslan & Buldukoğlu (2021), Eisma & Tamminga (2022), Mitima-Verloop et al. (2022), Selman et al. (2022), Eisma & Boelen (2023), Hanauer et al. (2023), Kumar (2023), Kustanti et al. (2023), Schneider et al. (2023), Sola et al. (2023), von Blanckenburg et al. (2023)). It should be noted that although Utz et al. (2012) had a specific measure of expectedness, this study did not mention this as a factor within the findings other than that

preventative measures can be taken in cases of expected death. Many of these studies emphasized that higher grief levels were associated with unexpectedness when those bereaved had a close relationship to the deceased, and many sources associated the perception of unexpectedness with the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, von Blanckenburg et al. (2023) found that “there were no differences in grief reactions detected between the death due to COVID-19 and deaths from other causes [which] contradicts the results of Eisma and colleagues, who found higher rates of PG in relatives who lost loved ones to COVID-19 compared to those who experienced natural deaths (Eisma et al., 2021). This association was explained by the unexpectedness of the loss. People who experienced COVID-19-related bereavement more often perceived the loss as unexpected compared to those who experienced natural deaths.” This finding could signify that unexpectedness is a significant factor in the development or worsening of PG, although Eisma & Boelen (2023) argue that the factor of unexpectedness appears more likely to be a risk factor for PGD within the populations affected by COVID-19 losses than others. Another conflicting finding is that the traumatic level of stress has been found to be more significant than the unexpectedness of death for the severity of grief responses, but another study found that unexpectedness of death is an essential distinguishing factor for grief resulting from COVID-19 death and natural causes. This leads to the possible conclusion that the perception of the events that the bereaved individual experiences surrounding the death may be the overarching significant factor.

### *Perception*

Rather than measuring expectedness specifically, five included studies measured the perception of the bereaved individual regarding the circumstances surrounding the loss, such as suddenness, confusion, difficulty sense-making, lack of preparedness/readiness, lack of control, lack of

closure, and experiencing multiple losses at once (Currier et al. (2006), Nakajima et al. (2012), Asgari et al. (2023), Amador et al. (2023), Serrine et al. (2023)). Currier et al. (2006) found that the sense-making of the bereaved is the critical pathway to PG rather than the objective cause of death, and it can be argued that this perception is related to the perceived unexpectedness of the bereaved regarding the loss. For the bereaved to not be able to make sense of the loss, it can be argued that this means that they did not expect the death. Similarly, Nakajima et al. (2012) found that suddenness and lack of readiness for death were reported as predictors of PG. If a death is sudden, this could signify that the death was unexpected. A lack of readiness for a death could also signify the factor of unexpectedness; if a bereaved individual was not ready for the death, perhaps this is because it was unexpected. Asgari et al. (2023) found that PG symptoms may arise during COVID-19 related bereavement due to feelings of helplessness and confusion, which could also be argued as stemming from the unexpected nature of the loss. Amador et al. (2023) did include unexpectedness as a factor but found that this factor stems not just from the suddenness of deaths but also from their prematureness. The study concluded that a lack of closure surrounding a death contributes to a heightened risk of PG, and because unexpectedness is operationalized as suddenness and prematureness, this lack of closure most likely signifies the unexpected nature of the loss. Lastly, Serrine et al. (2023) found that individuals who experienced multiple losses at once often took longer to progress through their grief, and while there could be multiple factors related to experiencing multiple losses at once that would worsen one's grieving process, a possible significant factor is the unexpected nature of losing so many loved ones at one time.

### *Outliers*

Two eligible sources either did not measure expectedness/suddenness or found a result that was contradictory to the findings of the literature included in the present study, but these were still eligible and included because their findings hold merit regarding the effect of unexpectedness on grief severity. Breen et al. (2021) found that COVID-19 bereaved participants reported significantly higher acute grief than those mourning natural deaths, but comparable to non-natural death related grief. Because higher levels of grief are reported as comparable between the two populations experiencing unexpected loss (either due to COVID-19 or an unnatural death), it could be argued that the reason for more severe grief is the factor of unexpectedness. It should be noted that acute grief was the focus of the study because PG cannot be diagnosed before 6 months post-death but can be predicted by acute grief. O'Connor et al. (2014) found that unexpected deaths (knowing of the impending death for less than one week) were not significantly different between complicated grief (PG) and non-complicated grief (acute grief), but this does not reveal whether or not unexpected deaths are predictive of higher grief severity.

### *Grief*

All 21 included sources measured the grief of the bereaved populations in relation to their perception of the events surrounding the loss. A total of 15 sources found results related to PG (Currier et al. (2006), Ott et al. (2007), Nakajima et al. (2012), Utz et al. (2012), O'Connor et al. (2014), Boelen (2015), Mitima-Verloop et al. (2022), Amador et al. (2023), Asgari et al. (2023), Eisma & Boelen (2023), Hanauer et al. (2023), Kumar (2023), Kustanti et al. (2023), Schneider et al. (2023), von Blanckenburg et al. (2023)). Only one source measured acute grief alone (Breen et al., 2021), and the other 5 sources measured grief severity in general, labeled as either grief reactions (Şimşek Arslan & Buldukoğlu, 2021), levels of grief experiences (Eisma & Tamminga (2022), Selman et al. (2022), Sola et al. (2023)), or as the length of time to process

grief (Sirrinc et al. (2023)). It should be noted that although Eisma & Boelen (2023) found unexpectedness to seemingly be a risk factor for PG, their study also clarified that the unexpected nature of COVID-19 deaths may explain the association of these losses with higher levels of acute grief than those bereaved due to natural deaths.

## **Discussion**

The synthesized findings from the included literature show that the unexpectedness of a death is predictive of acute grief and a risk factor for prolonged grief, and that it is a significant factor associated with greater bereavement distress during a pandemic. The most notable conclusion from this synthesis is that the suddenness of the death is not necessarily the leading factor affecting grief severity, but instead the perception of the bereaved individual regarding their preparedness for the loss. The perception of the bereaved individual before, during, and after the loss is of utmost importance regarding their levels of grief severity. Additional research should be done to further support the claim that greater perceived unexpectedness is predictive of PGD, but there is a definite association found between more severe grief and greater perceived unexpectedness. For a death to be unexpected, there is an implication of unpreparedness, and while expecting the death of a loved one may not necessarily mean one is prepared for that loss, it can be argued that expecting the loss may soften the intensity of the grief experienced in bereavement.

## *Limitations*

There are limitations for every scientific article that should be acknowledged when researching. A total of 11 sources were cross-sectional, so they were not able to follow up with their participants which does not support their findings as much as a longitudinal study would. A total of 3 sources had sample sizes of less than 100 participants, meaning they are not as generalizable

as they could be. This literature review is focused specifically on grief severity and the perception of expectedness of those bereaved and did not filter sources for eligibility based on any measures of population; all of the included literature provides an array of participants of different ages, genders, religions, cultures and races. Further research should be done on how individuals of specific populations are affected by their perception of their unexpectedness of the death when grieving.

### *Implications*

The findings of the present study can provide insight into how to approach treatment methods for different kinds of grief and broaden understanding of the complex psychological effects of grief. Learning that unexpected death increases the severity of grief in bereaved individuals could help them better understand and face their grief, as they can prepare themselves for the journey of grief they will most likely be facing. To know that one's perception of their unpreparedness for the loss they have experienced is predictive of acute grief and a risk factor for PG could help in the treatments and processes of these grief experiences, as this information could possibly serve in getting them the professional help that they may need to face their grief in a healthy way. It is also important to note the significance of unexpectedness during pandemic-related bereavement because the losses in a pandemic are numerous and there are many factors that make the deaths unexpected. If a pandemic arises again, it will be important to know that an increase in grief severity will most likely be reported by those bereaved due to the pandemic.

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