

## ***To have and to hold:* Lived experiences of widowers**

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**Abstract:** Expressing grief or any other overwhelming display of weakness is often discouraged in men because vulnerability is viewed as a feminine trait. Stereotypes suggest that women can register more and express grief than their male counterparts. Thus, men tend to apply the "masculine grieving" process, which deals with handling grief by themselves. Understanding gender differences is crucial in knowing how men give meaning to their experiences as widowers. However, the existing literature shows few gender-comparative studies on the experiences of widowhood. The present study investigated the lived experiences of widowers (men whose wife has died) to see how they went through and how they gave meaning to these experiences. Five men between the ages 30 and 78 and are currently in between 2-5 years of widowhood were interviewed about their widowhood experiences using the phenomenological method. After coding for similarities and differences between their experiences, four major themes emerged in all interviews: (1) living with the loss, (2) becoming a widower, (3) familial concerns, and (4) support system. As a result, the study showed the struggles widowers faced from their wives' demise until the time of complete acceptance of their loss. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, widowers' motivation to cope with the change and to continue moving forward is evident in this study.

**Keywords:** widowers; grief; masculine grieving; loss

### **I. Introduction**

A vast majority of widowhood research focused on women's experiences rather than men's. Less is known about whether differences in emotional well-being after bereavement vary systematically with the gender of the surviving spouse (Streeter, 2020). Widowhood is highly regarded as a woman's issue (Carr & Bodnar-Deren, 2009) because women typically carry the emotional weight of the grieving process. Widows (women who lost a spouse) also usually shift their attention to childcare, which seems like the most significant issue after the death of a spouse. In contrast, widowers (men who lost a spouse) are usually more centered on life's survival aspects, such as working to provide food and shelter (Boerner & Silverman, 2001 as cited in Jones, 2016). Although the grieving process is a unique and individual experience, grief in men is often disregarded because of the socially constructed roles of masculinity that

limit them in expressing their emotions towards their loss. Widowers may not deal with their feelings and become avoidant with their loss instead.

Consequently, previous research suggests that men adapt more poorly to widowhood than women. According to the Life Course Theory (LCT) concept of human agency, men may be more expected to suppress their emotional pain concerning the spousal loss. In contrast, women are expected to speak more openly and often their grief (Jones, 2016). Due to these rigid gender roles, internalizing feelings of loss and repressing grief are likely for men. As a result, men tend to become more vulnerable to depression in widowhood than women (Boerner & Silverman, 2001 as cited in Jones, 2016).

The study's primary purpose is to understand the widowhood experiences of men (aged 21 and above, who are in 2-5 years of being a widower) and explore how they give meaning to their widowhood experiences. Understanding gender differences is crucial in knowing how men provide meaning to their widower's experiences. Available research only suggests that most people, particularly women, adapt relatively well in the long run (Lee et al., 2001). Nevertheless, the existing literature shows gender-comparative studies on the experiences of widowhood scarcely, especially on men and losing a loved one (Jones, 2016). In this light, men's lived experiences on widowhood will be a rich source of data to adequately explain and narrow the gap between the current studies available. Taking a closer look at how men transition from being a husband to becoming a widower will give us a better understanding of how men make sense of their widowhood experiences. This study also allows professionals and support groups to provide widowers the necessary assistance and identify the best social, emotional, and mental needs that best suit them.

### *1.1 Gender and Grief*

The gendered aspects of grieving have been the subject of several studies. However, studies of grief experiences on widowers remain sparse. Thus, men have few resources to understand the challenging transition into widowhood upon losing a significant other. Yu et al. (2018) employed that transitioning to widowhood was associated with heightened symptoms of depression for both older men and women. However, with a prolonged loss period, men suffered more depressive symptoms than their female counterparts. To support this, a study by Carr (2004) stated that older widows are more likely than widowers to report enhanced self-esteem, personal growth, and a renewed sense of independence. In contrast, widowers are more likely to report loneliness and the desire for a confidante (Davidson, 2002).

Additional data revealed that widowhood appeared more difficult for men than women based on longitudinal research findings. While

conflicting research ambiguously reported no gender differences (Lee & DeMaris, 2007 as cited by Moran, 2016). Overall results suggest no gender differences in symptoms of traumatic grief. However, they find that widowers had a more difficult time processing the loss of their partners. This observation proposes that males may feel grief more strongly than females because they lack communication to convey their emotions (Boelen, & Den Bout, 2003 cited in Bagley, 2019). Consequently, a study by Keyes et al. (2014) indicates that unexpected deaths elicit more robust responses, as there is less time to prepare and adapt to the loss. Kraybill (2019) associates the context of unforeseen deaths to a variation of grief called traumatic grief, which suggests that such a loss triggers a post-trauma survival mechanism in addition to the mourning of whatever was unexpectedly lost.

As the process of grief is not only restricted or limited to the death of a spouse but can also extend to the demise of a family member, the different grieving expressions of a male parent are further explained in the context of child loss. In a study of the father's grief after a stillbirth (Swart, 2020), the author reveals that fathers experience distress in isolation and "keep in" internal emotional states (Chaplin, 2015). Moreover, the findings also highlight that male parent postpone their grief by focusing on the living wife and children. Throw themselves into work or projects around the house or take up a diversion to keep themselves occupied and avoid dealing with their emotions. All of which may contribute to developing a destructing coping mechanism. Although an avoidant coping method tends to demean the perception of how men manage their loss, research suggests that men feel grief more strongly than females.

Men may use this tactic to deflect the deep sense of loss and the intense interior experiences of grieve. Perrig-Chiello et al. (2016) state that widowers demonstrate more vulnerability in loneliness and suicide tendencies than widows. The researchers implied that widowers have elevated levels of dependence on their spouses and have few emotional and social ties outside the marriage. However, although receiving support from family and friends is essential for coping with grief, such support seemed insufficient in alleviating emotional loneliness or replacing a spouse's care. As a result, widowers experience higher rates of loneliness and a high possibility of remarriage. Recent evidence suggests that women have less desire to marry again. They may prefer to have serious dating relationships and not want to enter a formal union to take on caregiving chores that often accompany marriage. On the contrary, widowers may be more likely than widows to desire remarriage because marriage provides men with instrumental, emotional, and health-enhancing support (Cancian & Olicker, 2000 as cited in Carr, 2004.)

Several studies have examined the duration of the grieving process that notes on the lives of the widows. Macrae (2015) stresses

that it takes more than two years to get over the death of a loved one. The average person grieves for two years, one month, and four days before they start to move forward. Moreover, when a spouse dies, the spouse that has survived faces a higher risk of death, particularly in the first three months of bereavement (King et al., 2017). This critical period was called "The Widowhood Effect," where the early three months is said to be the most crucial time of grief processing. It suggested that the grieving spouses are more socially and physically vulnerable during these few months. During this early period of sorrow, the health of the griever tends to decline as they fail to take care of themselves after becoming widows or widowers. However, the next six to twelve months following the loss have shown that depression remains prevalent. According to Vézina et al. (1988), people widowed for more than two years to 36 months had a depression prevalence of 59%. Previous research also examined people who had been widowed for five years and found a depression prevalence of 13%, lower than the results in many of the more recent bereavement studies. Although there is a decreasing prevalence with increasing time since spousal loss, depression was high throughout the time studied compared to depression in community settings in general (Kristiansen et al., 2019). While widowhood seems to trigger various health problems, it is supposed that the experience of losing a spouse appears to change over time (Williams et al., 2012 as cited in Holm et al., 2019). An article published by Caserta in *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (n.d.) states that "men tend to move more quickly toward social recovery—that aspect of adaptation that refers to the need to reorganize one's life," which implies that coping does vary from individual to individual.

Based on the body of literature presented in this section, it is predicted that men grieve internally and engage in the action-oriented expression of grief. Previous authors mentioned earlier (Swart, 2020; Chaplin, 2015) state that fathers may tend to isolate grieving and suppress negative emotions in response to loss. In addition, several researchers (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2016; Yu, J et al. 2018; Carr 2004; Boelen & Den Bout, 2003 as cited in Bagley, 2019; Vézina et al., 1988) reveal that widowers are more likely to demonstrate depressive symptoms and various psychological problems than widows. Nevertheless, these findings remain to have conflicting results. Also, researchers investigating this specific topic often focused on the prevalence of depression and conducted a longitudinal design. Thus, the current study has recognized the need for phenomenological research to understand the phenomenon of widowhood profoundly and in-depth.

Moreover, the existing literature appeared to provide few gender-comparative studies that focused on the distinct experiences of widowers. It includes their grief features, coping, emotional behaviors, and health. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the lived

experiences of widowers (men whose wife has died) to see what they went through and how they gave meaning to these experiences.

### *1.2 Cultural Message*

Bereavement is a context characterized by heightened emotional intensity, and gender socialization processes play a significant role in men's and women's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the death of a loved one (Stelzer et al., 2019). While the way men and women grieve is revealed to be different and unique, there is also a profound difference in the way men and women experience grief based on cultural norms and expectations. Robben (2004) states that the meaning of bereavement, grief and mourning seems to differ across cultures, where most societies draw appropriate behaviors for widowed based on socially constructed sets of norms. As explained by the social role theory, differences and similarities arise primarily from the distribution of men and women into social roles within their society (Eagly & Wood, 2016). These roles, which are consensually shared expectations about men and women, emerge from everyday observations of what women and men do. Gender role expectations, as they are shared within cultures, influence the behavior of both sexes to conform to these beliefs.

In the article "*How Men and Women Grieve Differently*," the author characterized two distinct grieving practices. Masculine grieving refers to a type of grievers who refrained emotional disclosure. (McNess, 2008 as cited in Bowden, 2017) Rather than revealing their feelings and emotions, they tend to control slight signs of emotional vulnerability. This type of emotional containment was shown, primarily, in male participants in the study of McNess (2008 as cited in Bowden, 2017). According to researchers, inhibited emotional expression appears to fit traditional masculine norms. "Emotional containment was a way of preserving male social status, and the fear of the social consequences of emotional display caused bereaved men a great deal of anxiety and stress" (McNess, 2008 as cited in Bowden, 2017).

In contrast, Feminine grieving is characterized as an outward expression of emotions and having verbal communication to seek social support with others. This style of grieving tends to be more emotional and intuitive. (Bowden, 2017) Women may be more likely to adopt this style since they often confide with their closest friends and family about their loss. They tend to "feel" their way through grief (Bekkers, 2013). These two perspectives in grief practices may have developed the narrow view that women register more and express sorrow than their male counterparts. (Bekkers, 2013)

Therefore, the socially constructed norm and roles placed in men explain their low tendencies for emotional expression of grief. At the same time, this evidence from past literature may send the message about the lack of emphasis given to men, particularly in the dimension of spousal

loss and the unique role transition they undergo post-loss. Since widowhood is highly regarded as a woman's issue (Carr & Bodnar-Deren, 2009), the objective of the current study is to narrow the gap between the recent studies available by primarily focusing on widowers' lived experiences. By also exploring their state after 3-6 months and the 1-2 years post-loss, the researchers may be able to recognize the styles or patterns of grieving in men.

Moreover, with research displaying inconsistent results on which gender is more strongly impacted by grief, the societal pressures on men to conceal their emotions are harmful to their mental and social health. This study also allows professionals and support groups to give widowers the necessary assistance and identify the best social, emotional, and mental needs that best suit them.

## **2. Methodology**

Phenomenology is the appropriate method in this study because the researchers sought to identify the essence and understanding of human experiences about the phenomenon as described by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological study is defined as a deeper understanding of lived experiences by an individual from a phenomenon (Gearing, 2004) which includes the detailed description and perception of the experiences of an individual in a specific situation (Creswell, 2007). This approach fits the current study as its methods essentially provided the researchers with logical and systematic components that eventually lead to the essential descriptions of the phenomenon of male widowhood. Through this method, the analysis of the lived experiences of widowers and their essence became more eloquent. This study also utilized a constructivist worldview to acquire different views and opinions regarding Filipino widowers' lived experiences. Likewise, constructivism is a philosophical view which postulates that all knowledge comes from human experiences and provides different viewpoints for a study (Harvey, 2012).

### *2.1 Researcher's Role*

The researchers see the widowhood experiences, struggles, and coping strategies of men as an unturned stone. It is a left unexplored field, and given the social stigma that men were put through, they were often overlooked for showing emotions and weaknesses. The researchers want to focus on them to give awareness, additional knowledge, and understanding of the situation they have been to. The researchers were aware of the roles that we must partake in this study. Being the primary data collection tool, we know that our beliefs and emotions may influence or impede the investigation.

Given that every participant has subjective views that may or may not agree with the researchers' opinions, we, the researchers, practiced open-mindedness to every possible response. The researchers were also aware that such experiences are either treasured or painful memory for the participants, triggering an unexpected emotional response. The participants were assured that the researchers knew the social cues, observed body language, speech, tone of voice, and expressions. With practiced empathy and understanding, the researchers were aware of the participant's sorrow and grief and were considerate and mindful of their actions and responses. The researchers assisted by checking the participants' conditions after the data gathering procedure.

## *2.2 Participants*

Five (5) widowers from different cities in the Philippines were chosen as participants of this study. The respondents were all widowers for at least 2-5 years, and the age group ranges from 30-78 years old; among them, one is in a relationship, and the rest are single. The researchers sought mixed-age participants to cover the diversity of experiences of young, middle-aged, and older widowers. As this study explores the complexity of views towards widowhood and approaches of grieving widowers, a mixed-age will shed light on a more profound widowhood experience across different age groups.

Online call interviews through Facebook were the primary and best way to gather data since physical contact and social interactions are limited, given the pandemic's current situation. As spousal death might be a sensitive matter, online call interviews provided participants an encouraging atmosphere to better express themselves to the interviewers. Interviews were conducted at a time that was most convenient for the participants.

## *2.3 Research Instrumentation*

Before the interview, an informed consent form and demographic questionnaire were sent to the participants through Google forms. Afterward, the researchers scheduled the interviews and used a semi-structured interview containing open-ended questions. Two experts in this field validated the interview guide, and necessary revisions were made to address the validators' comments. Moreover, interview questions were open-ended to gain more insight and encourage participants to describe their own experiences about widowhood in their ways. Likewise, the researchers conducted pilot testing before proceeding to the interview correctly. Each respondent was assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and uphold confidentiality. Exchanges between participants and researchers were recorded using audiotapes, and once the study concluded, all recordings were safely disposed of and deleted.

Two researchers worked as the interviewers alternatively for each interview session, while the other researchers were also present, listening to the participants' responses, making handwritten notes. Interview questions were followed by the interviewer's probing, such as "can you elaborate more on the difficulties you mentioned? what specific difficulties have you experienced?" to obtain more specific, in-depth, and meaningful information from the respondents. The interview questions also consisted of timeline questions which took both the interviewer and the interviewee back to the earlier periods of their widowhood to help us recall their early experiences, such as "can you walk us through to the first 3-6 months after the death of your wife?" Additionally, since this study aims to capture how men give meaning to their widowhood experiences, the interviewer posed questions like "how would you describe yourself as a widower?" allowing the respondents to express their personal opinions and beliefs and identify themselves as a widower.

#### *2.4 Data Analysis*

All audio recordings were distributed for each researcher to transcribe. Transcription is conducted in an edited manner in which it focuses on delivering quality documents by excluding some sentences or phrases that are deemed unnecessary, excessive, or are grammatically incorrect. These transcriptions served as written documentation of the interview that researchers referred to from time to time during the coding process.

This study employed multiple coders to establish the reliability and validity of the coded data. The coding processes took three days to complete and 16 hours in total. Finalizing the codes, the researchers developed a codebook for each respondent for easier referral during the theming process.

The researchers went through the thematic analysis, which is defined broadly as "a way of seeing" and "making sense out of seemingly unrelated material" (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes or patterns of meaning within data (Daly et al., 1997). The researchers identified significant statements from the participants' responses and clustered them into codes and themes in this study. Themes were synthesized, and descriptions that account for the meaning and essence of the experiences about widowhood experiences were established.

To validate and increase the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings of this study, we employed the following strategies: member checking, reflexivity of researchers codebook, reviewed by an external auditor, triangulation, and thick description of the generated themes.

### **3. Results and Discussion**



The findings present four main themes in Table 1: living with the loss, becoming a widower, familial concerns, and support system. Each central theme has a corresponding sub-theme.

Table 1. Four Main Themes with the corresponding subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Living with the Loss	1.1 Dying Moment
	1.2 Initial Reaction to Death
	1.3 Acceptance of the Death
Theme 2: Becoming a Widower	2.1 Emotional Struggles
	2.2 Coping with the Loss
	2.3 Reliving the Memories
	2.4 Being a Widower
Theme 3: Familial Concerns	3.1 Role Adjustments
	3.2 Personal Adjustments
	3.3 Managing Finances
Theme 4: Support System	4.1 Social Support
	4.2 Spiritual Support
	4.3 Companionship Later in Life

#### *Theme 1: Living with the Loss*

Although cultural norms and gender role expectations express that men are expected to exhibit characteristics opposing vulnerability, findings from past literature suggested that widowed men find it more difficult to process their partner's loss. Further than that, the current study was also able to bring together the experiences of widowed men regarding how they confronted their loss. Three themes were identified: dying moment, the initial reaction to the death, and acceptance of death.

#### *Subtheme 1: Dying Moment*

Witnessing or being present during the wife's dying moment was an experience most widowers have in common in this study. Moreover, most of the widowers in this study also viewed their wives' passing as unexpected. One widower explained that he was beside his wife as she did not wake up and suffered sudden death. His exact words were:

*"Katabi ko siya eh. Talagang katabi ko siya nung nangyari yun."  
(Translation: I was beside her; I was really beside her when it happened.)*

Following this, a variation of grief is called traumatic grief, accompanied by an unexpected loss. According to Kraybill (2019), such a loss triggers post-trauma survival mechanisms in addition to the mourning of whatever was unexpectedly lost.

#### *Subtheme 2: Initial Reaction to Death*

In the study, the widowers expressed an array of emotions as initial reactions to the wife's death, such as shock, disbelief, and heavy feelings, especially when the wife's death was unexpected. Corresponding to this, a study by Keyes et al. (2014) indicates that unexpected deaths elicit more robust responses, as there is less time to prepare and adapt to the loss. As the widowers witnessed their wives' dying moment, they were still not ready. They were in a state of disbelief and shock upon hearing the news of their late wives' passing. Two widowers said it was hard to accept, and they could not believe it.

*“Mahirap tanggapin. Di nakakapaniwala.” (Translation: It’s hard to accept, still unbelievable.)*

One widower reported that he felt a heavy feeling at first and said, while another might have expected his wife's death but was still in a shock. His words were:

*“Kahit ako nabigla na ganong, parang bigla pa rin yung nangyari eh.” (Translation: Even I was shocked, what happened is still so sudden.)*

### *Subtheme 3: Acceptance of Death*

Study results revealed that the unexpected death of a loved one was the most common traumatic experience and is most likely the worst. Nonetheless, the widowers expressed that they felt the need to accept that their wife was gone and that they must move forward. Widowers had a hard time getting their late wives' death, but they chose to be positive and continue to move forward. In addition, widowers said that they have to move forward, accept, and continue. On the other hand, one widower noted that he initially took it but did it slowly because it felt heavy. His exact words were:

*“Inunti-unti ko nang tanggapin na wala na akong asawa, wala na akong katuwang. Simula pa lang, tinanggap ko na, pero syempre, unti-unti, unti-unti... kasi mabigat eh.” (Translation: I am gradually accepting that my wife is already gone, I have no one to lean on. In the beginning, I already accepted it, but of course, little by little, gradually...because it’s heavy.)*

Some participants accepted their wife's death immediately, while some went through gradual adjustments. Perrig-Chiello et al. (2016) implied that widowers have high levels of dependence on their late wives. In agreement with this, we observed that this might be a factor as to why some widowers find it difficult to accept their partner's death.

### *Theme 2: Becoming a Widower*

The significant events in the lives of men as they transition from being a husband to becoming widowers emerged as one of the themes.

Four subthemes emerged: emotional struggles, coping with the loss, reliving the memories, and being a widower.

#### *Subtheme 1: Emotional Struggles*

The present study's result is commensurate with research that widowers are more likely to be prone to depression after the death of their spouses. To support this, some respondents reported symptoms of depression. Though a clinical diagnosis is not present, the negative impacts of persistent feelings of loneliness in their daily lives were evident in their responses. Also, one widower expressed having suicidal thoughts after experiencing the loss. He said:

*“parang wala na rin eh. bahala na kung mamatay na rin ako para may kasama na yung asawa ko sa ano, ganoon ba” (Translation: it’s like nothing, it doesn’t matter if I die at least I will be with my wife).*

The current study results align with the notion that widowers are more likely to report loneliness (Davidson, 2002) than widows. Although men and women process loss differently, this study implies that men also experience the emotional aspects of the loss. Previous studies attributed spousal bereavement to cause several risk factors for depression in widowhood, and the association of time since spousal loss could have elevated its prevalence. Compared with the existing literature, a sample of widowers who participated in the current study reported their struggles. It includes experiencing extreme stress and going through the associated negative symptoms of grief, including loss of familial interest, bereavement-related regret, difficulty accepting the reality of the failure, and a sense of loss of meaning in life as they become widowers. As one shared:

*‘yung parang nawalan ka ng gana sa pamilya” (Translation: It’s like you’re losing interest in the family).*

#### *Subtheme 2: Coping with the loss*

Because the most challenging time was predicted to be in the early months of the bereavement process, the participants' way of dealing with their loss in early and consequent years displayed how they used several resources to cope, which might have also varied with participants' gender, age, and duration of their widowhood.

In contrast, middle-aged participants have previously responded negatively to their grief. This same groupage, in addition, has been said to use various diversions to cope with their loss. Some men found it helpful to spend much time outdoors and connect with friends to deal with their grief. Some widowers respond to stress by engaging in unhealthy behaviors like smoking, going to bars, and alcohol consumption. They shared:

*“kung ako ay nakaka-isang kahang sigarilyo, ngayon ay*

*dalawang kaha na” (Translation: If [before] I could finish one pack of cigarettes, now I could finish two packs)*

*” yung pera mo naubos lang sa bar, sa mga kumpare” (Translation: (My) money has ran out at the bar, with (my) buddies).*

Others of the same age have channeled their energy into action-oriented coping strategies like focusing on work and childcare, family bonds to overcome stress, physical activity, or addressing disruptions in the household as a distraction. It is similar to the findings of Perrig-Chiello et., al (2016) that male parents tend to postpone their grief by distracting their focus on the living wife and children. As one mused:

*”inaliw ko na lang yung sarili ko sa trabaho, pag-aasikaso sa mga bata” (Translation: I entertained myself with work and taking care of my children)*

### *Subtheme 3: Reliving the memories*

Although there were instances where widowers experienced missing and feeling their late wife's presence, depressive tendencies remain unclear. One participant (middle-aged, five years of being a widower) repeatedly expressed that he experienced forgotten his wife's passing and always felt his wife's presence even after the death. This observation proposes that widowers find it challenging to process the loss of their partner, which is consistent with the study conducted by Moran (2016). Their exact words were:

*”Ang nasa isip mo lagi.... laging parang nandyan lang siya.” (Translation: I would think about her every time...like she's always there.)*

*”Parang nandyan lang siya sa tabi mo.” (Translation: It's like she's just beside me).*

Furthermore, one widower reported visiting his wife's tomb often while one still kept his wife's urn.

### *Subtheme 4: Being a Widower.*

Moreover, widowers' life transition is associated with their own set of challenges and tasks. Even so, the process of adjustment to spousal loss can vary from individual to individual. While the most challenging times can be within the first six months to a year, the sample revealed that they are still adjusting even after a long time. Some are accustomed to the care of their past wife, while others have yet to accept their spousal loss. It employs widowers' experience of difficulty in adjusting and taking as they are confronted with the loss of their wives and a new role as a widowed people. Moreover, according to some widowers, the phenomenon of widowhood is indefinite to be adequately described. The

experience and meaning themselves are essentially ineffable and can only be understood until someone becomes one. They say:

*“mahirap kasing ipaliwanag sa mga kapwa nating tao yung nararamdaman namin” (Translation: it’s difficult to explain to other people what we feel)*

*"Ang widower, hindi ko siya madescribe kasi kapag naging byudo ka na eh" (Translation: a widower, I can't describe it unless you become one).*

Conversely, Williams et al. (2012, as cited in Holm et al., 2019) state that the experience of losing a spouse appears to change over time. The present study's widowers have similarly encountered personal changes in their emotional being and personality as a widower. Hence, indicating reports of feeling happy as they regain their sense of youth, delighted with having their children around while others describe the significant emotional recovery in their heavy feeling. Their changes also consisted of becoming emotionally vulnerable, adopting the late wife's personality, and others were still unable to say if they were happy. One participant described the changes in him as:

*"somehow adapting her character- personality, she was...ano eh..she listen to people, she help people so na acquire ko na yung mga yun" (Translation: somehow adapting her character- personality, she was... she listens to people, she help people so I acquired those.)*

Nevertheless, as they navigate widowhood's life, they also found grief and happiness come in waves, as they felt how it comes and how it goes.

### *Theme 3: Familial Concerns*

The widowers became single parents and single-handedly faced the responsibilities and finances left after their wife had passed. This theme emerged from the widowers' concerns for their families with the following subthemes: role adjustments, personal adjustments, and managing finances.

#### *Subtheme 1: Role Adjustments*

While the process of adapting and adjusting to spousal loss can vary from person to person, research has suggested that widowers feel distressed by the need to assume and adapt to domestic tasks. Concerning the related literature on gender and grief, past studies found that men's hours of domestic labor increase after widowhood. With this, widowed men are more likely unprepared by the experience for domestic tasks such as managing the household and sustaining childcare. From the

gathered data, one thing that all widowers shared was the process of adjusting. It primarily includes adapting responsibilities and filling the role of the late wife and the changes and adjustments in daily routine. One widower reported:

*"I tried to act normal, normal in a sense [that] you are trying to fill in the role of the wife."*

Past research suggests that the widow/widower will be left with unfamiliar tasks to adapt to when a spouse passes away. Particularly, widowers may also view the loss of a wife as losing a partner taking responsibility for home management and childcare. The present study shows that adapting and filling the late wife's role and responsibilities that involve family and home management were one of the initial concerns of the widowers. One participant shared:

*"Naka focus ako sa kanila. Ah, very hands on yung nanay niya so ngayon hands-on ako in trying to fill in those roles" (Translation: I am focused on them, ah, their mother is very hands on, so now I am also hands-on in trying to fill in those roles),*

Another experience of widowers is facing the unique and daunting challenges in adapting to their new role as sole parents. "Parental responsibilities" is the first subcategory under this theme. Although parents in this sample conveyed that parenting has become a significant adjustment since their co-parent's death, they are still engaging in high-quality parenting regarding their responsiveness to their children. They reported adjusting to single parenting roles, tending and looking after their children's needs, and taking on childcare responsibilities. As some fathers said:

*"daily needs mo, for kids.... nag gagatas isa, yung isa breastmilk"*  
(Translation: My daily needs, for kids....one of them needs [formula] milk, while the other one needs breastmilk).

*"Kailangan may mag-aasikaso sa mga bata, kailangan bago ka umalis naka-ready na" (Translation: The children needed someone to take care of them, before [I] leave, it should be ready)*

As they became the sole caregivers, these men showed their tremendous commitment and devotion to their progeny. The father's domestic role has taken precedence over everything else. These fathers have made a commitment to benefit their children by becoming involved in the daily care—dressing, settling, and feeding, which has only increased their fatherly involvement. However, in addition to confronting their responsibility for their dependent children, the study reveals that the widowers have discovered concern for their survival.

### *Subtheme 2: Personal Adjustments*

Although some widowers can adapt more quickly and easily than others, findings suggest that the widowers are likely associated with successful adjustments. Widowers explained that since the wife was gone, the shared parental responsibilities such as providing for the family and children are now taken up by them. One stated:

*“ako lang ang kikilos para sa pamilya namin.” (Translation: I’m the one who must do something for our family)*

These results are consistent with Jones's (2016) study, which states that widowed men are usually more centered on the survival aspects of life. According to an article published by Caserta in *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (n.d.), "men tend to move more quickly toward social recovery—that aspect of adaptation that refers to the need to reorganize one's life." In line with this, the present study found that widowers exhibit self-reliance and emotional progress in adjusting to their wife's death. In comparison with the study of Kristiansen et al. (2019), who found that there is still a depression prevalence (lower than the results in many of the studies of more recent bereavement) on men after five years of widowhood, the present study, which consists of male participants experiencing 2-5 years of widowhood expressed that they have personally adjusted over time.

### *Subtheme 3: Managing Finances*

When the death of a spouse comes suddenly and unexpectedly, the surviving partner is often left unprepared. Unfortunately, the widowers reported income loss and financial difficulty as some of them revealed themselves to be unprepared for managing financial matters, especially in households where their wife is the one who handles their day-to-day finances. Financial matters are often a challenge immediately after the death of a wife, where the widower feels the unmet needs concerning economic issues and cannot manage them. One widower revealed:

*“sa ngayon medyo magtipid ka kasi hindi na sapat ‘yung pera na hawak mo” (Translation: As of now, [I] have to save because the money that I have is not enough)*

After death, the widowers' transition to single parenthood is marked by increased management of all parenting responsibilities, including household finances. Therefore, handling the household finances and parenting responsibilities is a new norm for widowers concerning their experience of being "single" and widowed parents. The widowers then are necessitated to change their living situation and their financial state. For one, he said:

*“nung nawala siya, dumapa ulit ‘yung business ko. Ngayon nandito na naman ako ulit binabangon ko na naman ulit.” (Translation: when she died, my business dropped. Now, I am here trying to rebuild it again)*

#### *Theme 4: Support System*

Widowers reported tremendous social support and resources when they were grieving for their loss. As with the experience of middle and older widowers, they received unconditional support from their families, children, and grandchildren. Little assistance was categorized as social support, spiritual support, and companionship later.

##### *Subtheme 1: Social Support*

This sub-theme refers to widowers' support from their family, relatives, friends, and support groups. Support from outside the family, such as a support group for widowers, helped one of the respondents a lot. He found his coping resources by forming bereaved support groups where reciprocal confiding and mutual helping provide emotional and instrumental support. As he was a founder of a support group, he shared: *"dose kami nung nag start nun, now were about a thousand so puro widows-widowers lang yun na community" (Translation: We started with just 12 members, now we're about a thousand, a community for widows- widowers).*

##### *Subtheme 2: Spiritual Support*

Religious beliefs and faith influence the widower's ability to accept the event of death. Researchers in this study assumed that such a belief might have facilitated the widowers' recovery with their loss. This sub-theme refers to widowers' spiritual belief and faith that helped them cope, adjust, and accept what happened. Believing in the will of God has manifested as one of the widowers expressed:

*"God's will na yun eh, natanggap ko na" (Translation: It's already God's will, I already accepted it")*

##### *Subtheme 3: Companionship in later life*

Social support also appears to promote interest in new intimate partnerships among widowers. It is supported in Perrig-Chiello and colleagues' (2016) study that suggests the higher rates of loneliness and increased chances of men in entering a new relationship than women. As widows may feel disinclined to look after another person, the re-partnering in men, however, appears to barricade the loneliness and provides the widowers with instrumental, emotional, and health-enhancing support. (Carr, 2004) The desire to form a new union may be most prevalent among widowers who were most dependent on their late spouse and who are more likely compelled to fill the void left by their wife's death. It is demonstrated by the participants' desire to have



someone to be within later life, companionship, a profound expression of yearning, and a feeling of happiness. As widowers move forward in their lives, they still long for a companion and someone to share their life with someone. When asked questions about the possibility of having new relationships, they answered:

*“Iba talaga yung mayroon kang kasama pa rin sa buhay hanggang sa pagtanda” (Translation: It’s a very different when you have someone to grow old with)*

*“Kasi kailangan din naman natin ng partner sa buhay eh. Hindi naman pwedeng ikaw na lang sa bahay” (Translation: We all need a partner in life. It’s impossible to be just alone in your house)*

#### **4. Conclusion**

The widowhood community has emerged from the same life experience which married men and women come across at a certain point in their lives. As death can be itself distressing, the aftermath of an unexpected spousal death could be more dreadful for the surviving partner. In a profound effort to understand how men experience widowhood, the present study tried to explore men's experiences on widowhood regarding their struggles, coping, and sense of meaningfulness as a widower.

Four significant themes describing the widowhood experiences of five Filipino widowers emerged in this study: (1) living with the loss, (2) becoming a widower, (3) familial concerns, and (4) support system. As a result, it revealed the daily struggles, difficulties, and challenges widowers experienced from the beginning of their wives' demise until the time of complete acceptance of their spousal loss. However, despite the hardships, widowers' motivation to cope with the change and continue life, whether for their interests or responsibilities, can be adequately supported by the present study results. Furthermore, recommendations for future researchers exploring the experiences of widowers are to:

1. Investigate the population of widowers whose wives were terminally ill before dying, therefore having gone through the caregiving aspects until their spouses' death.
2. Invite more participants covering all age groups and limit the widowhood years between 2-3 years to explore the vulnerable population of widowers further.
3. Consider focusing on the population of men whose wives have died during childbirth and were left with all the responsibilities of newborn childcare.

4. More studies investigating the differences in grief experiences of widows and widowers must be done to identify help best suits them.

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