Do interventions make a difference to bereaved parents: a systematic review of controlled studies

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Authors' objectives
The author sought to determine whether the provision of bereavement support for parents who have lost a child will lead to better subsequent adjustment.

Searching
Six electronic databases were searched from 1990 to 2001: BIDS, PsycINFO, CINAHL, MEDLINE, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and ISI Web of Science. In addition, six key journals were handsearched from 2001: Journal of Palliative Care, British Journal of Psychiatry, British Journal of Health Psychology, OMEGA, Death Studies, and Bereavement Care. The search terms were reported in the review.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Studies that used a control group were eligible for inclusion. Case studies were excluded. The included studies employed controlled pre-test post-test or randomised controlled trial (RCT) designs.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies of bereavement support programmes were eligible for inclusion. The included studies examined the effectiveness of counselling, skill-building and information giving.

Participants included in the review
Studies of parents suffering late perinatal or child bereavement were eligible for inclusion. The included studies examined parents bereaved by infant death, perinatal death and violent child death. The included studies were carried out in Britain, the USA and Australia.

Outcomes assessed in the review
Studies with replicable outcome measures were eligible for inclusion. Studies with participant evaluation and/or author observations only were excluded. The included studies measured the outcomes using a variety of psychological assessment scales.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The author did not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
The author did not state that they assessed validity. However, the studies had to use valid outcome measures to be eligible for inclusion.

Data extraction
The author did not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction. Participant and study characteristics were extracted together with differences in the outcome measures between the groups.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
A narrative synthesis of the studies was undertaken.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between the studies were highlighted, both in the text and the tables of the review.

**Results of the review**
Three studies were included in the review: two RCTs (57 couples and 261 parents, respectively) and one controlled pre-test post-test study (172 parents).

Overall, the review did not find a beneficial effect of bereavement support programmes. However, benefits were observed within subgroups, particularly amongst more distressed parents who were considered to be at higher risk of poor adjustment (two studies).

**Authors’ conclusions**
Parental grief interventions that target a wide range of psychological, social and practical issues in mourning can be effective in reducing psychological symptoms and marital dysfunction in highly distressed parents.

**CRD commentary**
The research question and subsequent inclusion criteria for the review were clearly stated. The search strategy searched a number of databases and journals, but did not report any attempts to locate unpublished material, and no language restrictions were reported. Thus, language and publication bias cannot be excluded. The author did not appear to systematically assess the validity of the included studies. Whilst one study was given less emphasis due to concerns over methodology, the reliability of the results may still be compromised. Details of the studies and participants were adequate. However, the results were only expressed in terms of significant or non significant differences in outcome measures. Consequently, a full appraisal of the results is not possible. The data were appropriately synthesised in the narrative, and the author's conclusions were sensible. No steps to minimise bias in the review process were reported; selection bias may have influenced the results.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**
Practice: The author suggested that a risk assessment of bereaved parents should be considered, with interventions subsequently offered to those at high risk or who request help. Such interventions would recognise individual and gender differences in the reaction to child loss.

Research: The author highlighted the need for more research into what constitutes risk. The issue of long-term follow-up, particularly in relation to fathers, was also discussed.

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**Record Status**
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.