

Grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring perceived physical health as a predictor for rumination

Lily Merritt, B.A., Sydney Friedman, B.S., Morgann West, B.A., Mary-Frances O'Connor, Ph.D., Psychology,
University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

Background: Ruminative thought predicts complicated grief and hinders the adjustment to loss by acting as a cognitive avoidance strategy. Not only is the process linked to psychological issues, rumination is also associated with negative health consequences, such as poor sleep quality, impaired immune functioning, and cardiovascular disease. Understanding how bereaved people adjust to the death of a loved one, and the associated physical and psychological health outcomes, can offer meaningful direction for interventions. Self-reported physical health has been shown to be indicative of documented physical health. Very few studies have investigated the potential relationship between self-reported physical health and rumination, especially in the bereaved population. **Methods:** Arizonans who experienced the death of a partner, child, sibling, parent, grandparent, other family member, non-biological family, or close friend in the past year were recruited for a semi-structured phone interview, during which they reported their grief severity, depressive symptoms, grief-specific rumination, and perceived physical health. **Results:** In the present study ($N = 51$), we tested whether perceived physical health acts as a predictor for grief-specific rumination in bereaved individuals who experienced the death of a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants (74.5% White, 80.4% non-Hispanic) had an average age of 51 ($SD = 15.9$) and were mostly female (76.5%). Linear regression analyses showed that self-reported physical health predicted grief rumination outcomes ($F = 4.0, p = 0.005$). Notably, self-reported physical health also predicted grief severity ($F = 4.0, p < 0.005$) and depression ($F = 5.2, p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** These results are consistent with previous findings that engagement in ruminative thought is associated with poorer health. Using self-report measures to assess physical health may offer accessible insights related to psychological health outcomes—especially in a time of social distancing.