IIUM Journal of Human Sciences
Vol. 8, No. 2, 2026, 15-49
ISSN 2682-8731 (Online)

Navigating Grief and Post-traumatic Growth Among Muslim Adults Who Lost a Parent During Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Losing a parent during adolescence can profoundly affect development, imposing physical and psychological challenges that may persist into adulthood. This qualitative study explored reactions to loss, coping strategies, and post-traumatic growth among six Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand participants lived experiences. Thematic analysis revealed four major domains: reaction to loss, coping strategies, post-traumatic growth, and the continuing grief process. Participants' initial responses ranged from shock and emotional withdrawal to delayed grief that surfaced later in adulthood. Coping strategies varied across emotion-focused, maladaptive, religious, and problem-focused responses, with socio-cultural and spiritual influences shaping their choices. Emotion-focused coping, particularly thought suppression, helped participants maintain functioning but at times hindered emotional processing. Religious practices offered meaning and stability, although some participants experienced guilt framed by their faith. Despite these struggles, many participants reported growth in areas such as personal strength, spirituality, and life purpose. The findings also highlighted that grief was not fully resolved over time. Instead, it resurfaced during significant life events, reflecting the non-linear and enduring nature of loss. This study underscores the need for culturally sensitive grief interventions that address both immediate emotional needs and the long-term psychological journey of bereaved Muslim youth.

Keywords: *adolescence, coping strategy, grief, Muslim coping mechanism, post-traumatic growth*

INTRODUCTION

"Every soul shall taste death" Surah Al-Ankaboot verse 57

Death is a natural part of life, and for the living, the next ultimate journey on earth is death. However, the impact of death is not only felt by the living but also by those who are left behind. It has been recorded that the Prophet ﷺ experienced grief several times in his life, including the loss of his wife and his children. To grieve is as natural as being saddened by the loss of loved ones, as recorded in one Hadith, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1303.

> "*The Prophet took hold of Ibrahim, kissed him, and smelled him. Then, we entered as Ibrahim was breathing his last breaths. The Prophet's eyes shed tears. 'Abdur Rahman*

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> *ibn Awf said, "Even you, O Messenger of Allah?" The Prophet said, "O son of Awf, this is mercy." Then, the Prophet wept some more, saying, "Verily, the eyes shed tears and the heart is grieved, yet we will not say anything but what is pleasing to our Lord. We are saddened by your departure, O Ibrahim!*"

Thus, grief is natural, but the grieving process itself can be a critical event that heavily affects members of the grieving family. The loss of a parent can affect children by removing a key attachment figure critical for healthy development, especially during adolescence.

The adolescent period is characterised by significant biological, psychological, and developmental changes during the ages of 10 and 19 years old (Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023, World Health Organisation, 2021). Any critical events could severely affect their development, and one key event is parental loss before they turn 18 years of age or reach the age of maturity (Faleke et al., 2023; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). This situation may affect many individuals; globally, an estimated 1 million children have lost at least one parent (Hillis et al., 2021), underscoring the urgency of exploring and understanding the long-term implications of such losses.

The youth development stage is characterised by distinct neurodevelopment of the brain, particularly the final growth of the frontal lobe, as well as the brain stem, cerebellum, occipital lobe, parietal lobe, and temporal lobe (Arain et al., 2013; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023). These areas support complex cognitive functions, including problem-solving, memory, language, initiation, decision-making, impulse control, and social and sexual behaviour (Arain et al., 2013; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023). Notably, the frontal lobes undergo active maturation during adolescence and only reach full development by the end of adolescence and into early young adulthood (Arain et al., 2013; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023). From a psychosocial perspective, Erikson's well-known theory posits that adolescence is a stage for resolving identity versus role confusion to develop one's sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Given this ongoing psychological and neurodevelopmental process, adolescents depend heavily on their parents for social guidance and support in psychological and emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988; Delgado et al., 2022). Thus, a loss at this formative stage can severely disrupt the adolescent's sense of safety, belonging, and ability to form and manage interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Delgado et al., 2022), further hinder their identity development, and lead to role confusion (Erikson, 1968), emotional insecurity (Bowlby, 1988), and various psychological issues (Appel et al., 2019; Asgari & Naghavi, 2020; Burrell et al., 2020; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023).

Several other studies have highlighted the severe psychological impacts of parental loss on adolescents. Adolescents may exhibit prominent symptoms, including mood disorders, heightened suicidal ideation, anxiety, insomnia, substance addiction, depression, and an increased risk of mental health issues (Appel et al., 2019; Asgari & Naghavi, 2020; Burrell et al., 2020; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023). In some cases, unresolved grief may also manifest as social withdrawal, poor academic performance, and behavioural problems (Faleke et al., 2023) and, if not addressed appropriately, can lead to long-term consequences such as chronic illness and poverty (Hillis et al., 2021). Without effective and timely intervention, these psychological consequences can persist into adulthood, leading to long-term psychosocial problems, mental impairment, and low quality of life (Appel et al., 2019; Asgari & Naghavi, 2020; Burrell et al., 2020; Faleke et al., 2023; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023).

In order to understand the psychological consequences of parental loss, the process of grief can be used as a means of exploring this phenomenon. Grief is an emotional reaction to loss, expressed in diverse ways and shaped by an individual's personal experience,

developmental stage (Appel et al., 2019; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023), and cultural and religious factors (Adiukwu et al., 2022; De Stefano et al., 2021). For adolescents, grief can manifest in a wide range of emotional reactions, such as denial, sadness, anger, anxiety, feelings of emptiness, or withdrawal, often influenced by their developmental vulnerabilities and limited coping abilities (Appel et al., 2019; Asgari & Naghavi, 2020; Burrell et al., 2020; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023).

Coping strategies play a pivotal role in shaping bereaved adolescents' psychological adjustment and long-term emotional well-being (Altinsoy, 2023; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Zalli, 2024). Whether grief leads to growth or prolonged emotional distress often depends on the types of coping strategies adopted by the adolescent (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Guanco et al., 2023; Upton, 2023). However, the ability to cope adaptively is influenced by several developmental factors, including biological age, cognitive maturity, and social-emotional capacity (Alvis et al., 2023; Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019). Adolescents commonly experience mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety) and behavioural problems during bereavement (Asgari & Naghavi, 2020; Burrell et al., 2020; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023) and their choices of coping strategies significantly influence both short- and long-term psychological outcomes (Adeyemi et al., 2025; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023).

While parental loss during adolescence is undeniably traumatic, it can also act as a catalyst for positive psychological change in some individuals, a phenomenon known as Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). PTG is defined as the positive psychological changes that occur as a result of traumatic life circumstances (Calhoun et al., 2010). PTG does not eliminate suffering but reflects the possibility that bereaved individuals may eventually experience increased personal strength, a greater appreciation for life, deeper spiritual insight, and improved relationships (Calhoun et al., 2010).

Despite growing interest in grief research, most studies on parental loss, adolescent bereavement, and post-traumatic growth have been conducted within Western contexts (Altinsoy, 2023; Lundberg et al., 2023; Tuazon & Gressard, 2023). As a result, limited attention has been given to how Muslim individuals experience and make sense of parental loss, particularly when the loss occurs during adolescence and continues to shape their transition into adulthood. This gap is important because adolescence is a sensitive developmental period marked by identity formation, emotional security, and increasing social independence (Erikson, 1968; Bowlby, 1988; Delgado et al., 2022). The death of a parent during this stage may therefore disrupt not only emotional functioning but also the adolescent's developing sense of self, attachment security, and coping capacity.

Islam provides guidance on how to deal with Loss. Values such as *Qadr* (Divine Decree), *Tawakkul* (trust in Allah), *Yaqin* (certainty in faith), and belief in the afterlife are critical components within the Tawhidic framework to guide Muslims dealing with loss. These beliefs may provide comfort, acceptance, spiritual strength, and meaning-making during bereavement, as Islamic coping frameworks emphasise faith's role in shaping resilience and psychological adaptation to loss (Çınaroğlu, 2024). However, religious meanings may also influence how grief is expressed, suppressed, or interpreted, especially when cultural expectations encourage emotional restraint or patience in the face of loss. Therefore, Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence offer an important perspective on how developmental vulnerability, cultural expectations, and religious meaning-making interact over time. This current study responds to this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence, focusing on their reactions to loss, coping strategies, and experiences of post-traumatic growth (PTG). The following research objectives

guide the current research process:

1. To explore the reactions to loss among Muslim adults who experienced parental loss during adolescence.
2. To examine the coping strategies adopted by Muslim adults following the loss of a parent during adolescence.
3. To explore the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) experienced by Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence.

METHOD

Research design

The research intended to understand the lived experience of grief among Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence. This study used a phenomenological research design, a qualitative method. Phenomenological research is appropriate when the researcher seeks to explore how individuals experience, interpret, and make meaning of a particular phenomenon in their lives (Hourigan & Edgar, 2020). In the present study, the phenomenon explored was parental loss during adolescence and how participants remembered, interpreted, and carried this experience into adulthood.

Although thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, the overall research design remained phenomenological because the study focused on the meaning and essence of participants' lived experiences (Hourigan & Edgar, 2020). The interviews encouraged participants to describe their personal experiences of parental loss, including their emotional reactions, coping strategies, and perceived post-traumatic growth. Thus, thematic analysis was not used merely to categorise responses, but to identify shared patterns of meaning across participants' subjective accounts of grief, coping, and growth.

Because this study adopted a phenomenological orientation, the analysis followed an inductive approach. Rather than imposing predetermined themes onto the data, the researcher allowed themes and subthemes to emerge from the participants' narratives. This is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which allows researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns of meaning within qualitative data. However, the broader domains of analysis were informed by the study's research objectives, namely reaction to loss, coping strategies, and post-traumatic growth. This allowed the study to remain focused on the research aims while still preserving the inductive nature of theme development. The hierarchical structure of the domains, the themes, and ultimately the thick description (categories) of the phenomenon is organised as shown in Table 2. This hierarchical arrangement is justified as it allows a combined deductive and inductive approach of examining an assumed shared psychological phenomenon, which is grief and post-traumatic growth, yet with the attempt to capture the subjective, individualised experience of these phenomena. To do so, the hierarchical arrangement begins with domains (deductive), followed by themes and categories (inductive) that emerge from the acquired data.

This research approach was well-suited for a grief-related topic because it prioritises the subjective experiences of individuals, which are critical when examining reactions to loss, coping strategies adopted, and post-traumatic growth during the grieving process. It also allowed for a nuanced interpretation of how individuals made meaning from their loss within cultural and religious contexts (Çınaroğlu, 2024; Jegathesan, 2019; Kazanjian et al., 2020). Prior studies have further supported the value of phenomenological approaches in grief

research. For instance, Meyer-Lee et al. (2020) adopted a phenomenological approach to understand long-term grief responses to parental death, highlighting the re-emergence of grief during significant life events. Similarly, Tuazon and Gressard (2023) highlighted that phenomenology is useful in understanding how individuals navigate grief and post-traumatic growth as they seek meaning from their loss. Hence, by utilising this approach, the current study explored the unique and multifaceted grief experiences of Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence.

Participants and Sampling

The final study sample consisted of six participants (3 males and 3 females). This aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2016) recommendation of a reasonable sample size range from 3-25 participants for a phenomenological study. The number of participants was determined based on data saturation, an essential component of qualitative research, where additional information no longer produces new themes or insights (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Malterud et al. (2016) introduce the concept of information power, which indicates that the smaller the sample, the more information each participant provides to reach data saturation. When the participants of the study are specific and relevant to the research objectives, for instance, Muslim adults who experienced parental loss during adolescence and meet the inclusion criteria, a smaller sample size can still provide sufficient data to obtain significant results. Importantly, the emphasis is on data quality rather than quantity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Sarfo et al., 2021).

Moreover, the current study used purposive and snowball sampling to carefully select participants based on the inclusion criteria. This approach deepens insight into their grief experience, increases the likelihood of reaching data saturation, and supports the reliability and credibility of the data (Douglas, 2022; Hennink et al., 2019).

The inclusion criteria include Muslim participants aged 18 to 62 years. This was based on individual well-developed autobiographical memory, allowing them to reflect on significant emotional situations, such as parental loss (Martin et al., 2023; Rubin et al., 2004). Secondly, Muslim adults who lost a parent between the ages of 10 and 17 years (Adolescence) (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2019; Erikson, 1963). Lastly, at least five years must have passed since the parental loss to allow time for coping and potential PTG (Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and individuals who have experienced PTG with basic proficiency in English.

Measures

The informed consent included a section on study information, the research method (interview), potential risks and benefits, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality. The following section collected demographic information, including name, email, contact, gender, nationality, race, and religion, as well as whether the participant had lost a parent during adolescence (ages 10-18), whether at least five years had passed since the death, and whether the participant possessed basic English proficiency. The form attached to the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), was used to assess PTG. A higher score indicates a higher level of PTG. Six participants with the highest PTG scores were selected. Those with the highest PTG scores who consented to being contacted were invited to interviews via email.

Procedure

The research process included two phases: a screening to assess PTG and an in-depth interview (IDI). The screening phase assessed PTG using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) and supported the sample's inclusion criteria. The IDI was the primary data-collection tool for the current study. After obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Committee, the researcher began distributing the online Google Form. The form was circulated through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook and messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram. The first section of the Google Form included demographic information (as mentioned above), information about the study, the nature of the study (interview), and informed consent stating participant confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researcher, drawing on the study's research objectives, theoretical framework, and relevant literature on adolescent grief, coping strategies, and post-traumatic growth. The protocol was not directly adopted from an existing instrument but was tailored to the study's phenomenological aim and the specific cultural-religious context of Muslim bereavement. It comprised open-ended questions that invited participants to describe their lived experiences of parental loss, how they coped with grief, and whether they experienced any form of personal, relational, or spiritual growth after the loss. Follow-up questions were used flexibly during the interviews to obtain clarification, encourage elaboration, and explore meanings that emerged from participants' narratives.

Permission to record was requested before the semi-structured interview session, which lasted about 1 hour. The researcher conducted four interviews virtually via Microsoft Teams and two in person.

The researcher's own experience of losing a parent during middle adolescence was disclosed selectively when appropriate, particularly to create a sense of safety, empathy, and shared understanding with participants (Dianiska et al., 2021). However, given the researcher's personal connection to the topic, reflexivity was considered an important part of the research process. Reflexivity refers to the ongoing practice of critically examining how the researcher's subjectivity, assumptions, and context may influence the research process and data interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The researcher therefore remained mindful that her own grief experience could influence the way participants' narratives were heard, interpreted, and analysed. To minimise this possibility, the researcher kept reflexive notes during and after the interviews to document emotional responses, assumptions, and emerging interpretations. During data analysis, the researcher repeatedly returned to the transcripts to ensure that the themes remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than being shaped by the researcher's personal bereavement experience. Additionally, the second author reviewed the data and findings after analysis to confirm that the identified themes and patterns were grounded in the data.

After each interview, participants were emailed a grief support hotline as part of the post-interview support procedure. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data analysis procedure

Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which guided the identification of patterns and themes relevant to the research objectives: exploring reactions to loss, coping strategies, and experiences of PTG. This approach ensured a rigorous and transparent process for identifying patterns and themes (Braun

& Clarke, 2006).

The first phase involved familiarising myself with the data and transcribing the interviews into a Google Spreadsheet. Four interviews were online recordings, and two were face-to-face interviews recorded on audio. The transcripts were then read and re-read to understand and identify potential themes. Phase two focused on generating initial codes. The researcher highlighted relevant statements related to the participant's reaction to loss, coping strategies, and their experience of PTG, and grouped the data to create categories. Coding was done manually on a Google Spreadsheet.

In the following Phase three, the codes were organised and collated into potential domains, themes and categories. In Phase four, the domains were reviewed and amended accordingly to reflect the data by checking whether the themes and categories were relevant to the domains and vice versa. Some themes and categories were combined, amended and removed accordingly. The excerpts were extracted from the transcript for each category and organised.

Phase five focused on clarifying the essence of the themes and categories by analysing their meaning in relation to the research objectives. The last phase six, involved producing the research report by compiling the data extracted for each theme and integrating them into a meaningful narrative and description of the participants' experience, and linking the results back to the research objectives of exploring the reaction to loss, examining the coping strategies adopted and exploring the experience of PTG of Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence.

Ethical consideration

The study received approval from the International Islamic University Research Ethics Committee (IREC) to adhere to ethical standards for researching sensitive topics such as parental loss, approval number: IREC 2024-374. The ethical implications of this research were carefully considered, particularly regarding participants' emotional well-being. We obtained informed consent early in the recruitment process, ensuring participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, potential risks, and benefits. They were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, additional measures were taken to mitigate any emotional distress. The questions were framed to allow participants to explore their grief experiences at their own pace, with the option to skip or pause when necessary. In case participants become emotionally triggered, the researcher offers immediate support, including referral to mental health services if required. The researcher strictly maintained confidentiality and used pseudonyms to anonymise participants' identities. All data were securely stored with password protection. The research upheld ethical standards of non-maleficence (avoiding harm to participants), beneficence (ensuring potential benefit), and justice (fair selection of participants). These safeguards aim to balance the research's potential to contribute valuable insights with the need to protect participants from undue harm (American Psychological Association, 2017). A limitation of the research design is that, as a qualitative study, it cannot be generalised. Future research can consider quantitative or mixed methods.

FINDINGS

Participants' profiles

Table 1 summarises the demographic and background information of the participants in this study. All six participants identified as Muslim adults who experienced the death of a biological parent between the ages of 10 and 16. At the time of the interview, they were aged between 26 and 60. The sample included both Malay and Burmese individuals, with an equal distribution of males and females. Four participants had lost their mother, while two had lost their father. The causes of death varied and included breast cancer, sudden illness, and chronic health issues. PTG scores, assessed using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), ranged from 42 to 93, reflecting differing levels of post-traumatic growth across the sample.

Table 1: Participants' Profiles of Muslim Adults who lost a parent during adolescence

Pseudonym	Gender	Current Age	Nationality	Religion	Age at Loss	Lost Parent	Cause of Loss	PTG Score
Alya	Female	33	Malay	Muslim	15	Mother	Breast Cancer	69
Bilal	Male	60	Malay	Muslim	13	Father	N/A	81
Cyra	Female	35	Burmese	Muslim	13	Mother	Sudden death	75
Dania	Female	26	Malay	Muslim	10	Mother	Breast Cancer	42
Elias	Male	32	Burmese	Muslim	10	Mother	Health issues	93
Faiz	Male	29	Malay	Muslim	11	Father	Pneumonia	93

Using thematic analysis, the findings were organised into four broad domains. Three domains were guided by the research objectives: (1) Reaction to Loss, (2) Coping Strategies, and (3) Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). Within these domains, themes and categories were generated inductively from participants' narratives. An additional domain, Continuing Grief Process, emerged from the data and reflected the ongoing and non-linear nature of grief beyond the initial loss. Each domain comprises themes and categories, illustrated with participant quotes and integrated interpretations. The findings highlight both shared patterns and individual variations in participants' grief trajectories. Table 2 summarises the domains, themes, and categories.

Table 2: Domains, Themes, and Categories Identified Through Thematic Analysis

Domains	Themes	Categories
Reaction to Loss	Immediate Reactions	Shock and Numbness
		Denial and Confusion
		Premature Role Shift
	Delayed Reactions (from adolescence to adulthood)	Overwhelmed
		Anger
		Acceptance
		Guilt and Rumination
	Survival-Oriented Reaction	Financial hardship
Coping Strategies	Emotion-Focused Coping	Thoughts Suppression
		Physical and Self-Soothing Activities
	Maladaptive Coping	Self-Harm and Pain-Seeking Activities
		Suicidal Thoughts
		Social Withdrawal and Distraction

	Religious Coping	Cognitive Reappraisal (After-life Belief)
		Religious practices
		Religiously Framed Guilt
	Family and Social Support	Remaining Parent
		Siblings Bond
		Friends and their parents
	Problem-Focused Coping (Adulthood)	Seeking Professional Help
		Self-Education
Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)	Personal Strength	Independence
		Resilience
		Maturity
	Spiritual Strength	Acceptance of Qadr (Divine Decree)
		Find New Meaning in Life
		Better Relationship with Allah (God)
	Appreciation of Life	Value Education
		Appreciate people in their lives
	New Possibilities	Perspective on Marriage
		Changes in Life Priorities
	Relating to Others	Understanding and being Empathetic towards Others
Continuing Grief Process	Re-Grief and Ongoing Struggle	Triggered by Major Life Events
		Lingering Emotions

Reaction to loss

The phenomenon to be discussed, Reaction to Loss, consists of three themes: Immediate Reactions, Delayed Reactions (from adolescence to adulthood), and Survival-Oriented Reactions. Participants' responses to the death of a parent during adolescence revealed a complex and evolving grief trajectory. These reactions were not only experienced in the immediate aftermath but often re-emerged in adulthood, shaped by changing responsibilities and the demands of survival.

Immediate Reactions

The majority of the participants' initial responses to parental death during adolescence were marked by overwhelming emotional disruption, most commonly shock, emotional numbness, denial, confusion, and a premature shift in family roles. These reactions occurred acutely as an immediate aftermath of the loss, especially for those experiencing parental death for the first time. Although Cyra and Elias had previously experienced the death of a sibling, the loss of a parent was experienced with greater emotional intensity.

Shock emerged prominently across most of the participants' narratives. Most of them described the death as something surreal. In most cases, this initial state of shock was closely followed by a sense of emotional numbness, which appeared to act as a short-term buffer against overwhelming feelings of grief. Participants also remembered experiences of denial and confusion, especially during the early hours following the loss. This early psychological short-term buffer, marked by disbelief, numbness and confusion, appeared to delay grief for some participants. For instance, despite seeing her mother's lifeless body, Cyra recalled struggling to process the reality of what had happened. She stated:

"Shocked. Like, yeah, like that. I feel like we became shocked and trying to, like, think

> *that, oh, maybe she's just sleeping. She just looked like she was sleeping…And then, gradually added. And then, I didn't cry that time. I think it's because we're still shocked." (Cyra)*

Another example, Alya described feeling emotionally detached from her own emotions on the day of her mother's funeral:

> *"On the day she passed away, I felt numb. Like I don't know how… You just don't know how to react. You just like, 'Is this real?'"* (Alya)

Elias echoed this sense of internal disconnection:

> *"With everything going on, I just feel numb, nothing. Just like emptiness."* (Elias)

Dania also reflects on her confusion, both regarding her own emotions and her younger brother's response to the loss of their mother:

> *"At that time, I didn't really understand my feelings… I remember I looked at my little brother and I questioned why he didn't cry so badly. Later, when I grew up, I thought, ohh… he's not understood yet."* (Dania)

Another salient subtheme under the immediate reactions theme was the premature role shift experienced by the participants who were the eldest siblings. In the aftermath of the immediate loss, Alya, Cyra, and Elias found themselves buckling up and taking on adult responsibilities, often without time to properly mourn. Cyra recalled:

> "*I had to be the adult… take care of my younger siblings*." (Cyra)

Elias, who discovered the body and had to take initiative before his father could return home for the funeral, recounted that:

> "*My dad was out of the state when my mom passed away. I am the eldest son, so I feel like I have to protect my younger brother and deal with the situation."* (Elias)

Similarly, Alya also shared how she supported her remaining parent, her father, as she stepped into the caregiving role.

> "*There was no one else older than me. So, I had to help my siblings and make sure my dad was okay*." (Alya)

These narratives by the participants reflect the sudden shift in adolescent roles replaced by adult-like responsibilities, especially during grieving, when they are often without adequate emotional support or space and time to mourn the loss, when they assume the role of elder sibling, unlike their other siblings.

Delayed reactions (from adolescence to adulthood)

In most cases, grief that had been initially suppressed or unresolved reappeared in more emotionally complex forms during their late adolescence to early adulthood. For some participants, emotional reactions were not immediate but gradually appeared over time, shaped by developmental changes, role responsibilities, and the ongoing internalisation of the loss. Elias described experiencing overwhelming grief days later, when the household had returned

to routine. She called that:

> "*I remember running away to the balcony, sitting down. Hiding my face between my thighs. And, like, literally crying my eyeballs out. I was so overwhelmed with all the emotions the days before*." (Elias)

Fiaz reported experiencing anger three years after his father's death:

> "*And also anger for, like, for, like, one year and a half." "And, yeah, I just felt a little bit, I was like, why me*?" (Faiz)

Several participants also reported gradual acceptance of the loss (Cyra, Elias, Bilal, and Faiz), but the process often took years. Cyra noted that she had no choice but to accept the reality:

> "*So, we, yeah. And then, only after a while, we have to, like, start accepting it. We had no choice*." (Cyra)

A recurring emotion among participants was guilt, although its source and expression varied significantly. Elias expressed deep remorse for not heeding his mother's request to stay at home, which she had made just a few hours before her death. He recounted:

> "*I regret not listening to her... she told me not to go out on the street*." (Elias)

Alya's guilt stemmed from perceived social expectations surrounding how individuals should grieve, an experience echoed by Elias. Despite Alya expressing her sadness and crying intensely while her mother was in a coma for a week, Alya felt judged for not crying during the funeral. She described feeling as though she had exhausted all her grief beforehand:

> "*I didn't cry at the funeral, but I cried so much the week before… people said things, and it made me feel I was supposed to be crying during her funeral*." (Alya)

For Dania, her guilt stemmed from internal conflict about moving on. She feared that feeling "ok" might imply that she was forgetting her late mother:

> "*I feel bad if I'm okay… like I'm scared I will forget her*." (Dania)

Dania continued to reflect that her young age at the time of the loss (10 years old) may have affected her ability to process grief well, which later contributed to lingering feelings of guilt during her early teen years. She shared:

> "*I think that I should have, I should be more sad like during the time my mom passed away." "…and then it, I think it impact me later on, during my teenage lah… I think like thirteen (13), during my high school*." (Dania)

These narratives from the findings revealed how grief can be regulated internally and externally. The participants were not only burdened by the emotional weight of loss, but also by social and cultural expectations about how they should grieve. The guilt some participants carried eventually evolved into repetitive rumination. For instance, Elias, replayed "what-if" scenarios involving his mother's final moments. These delayed reactions highlight how unresolved grief can manifest across different developmental stages, often persisting into adulthood even long after the parental loss.

Survival-oriented reaction

In contrast to the participants above who described immediate or emotional reactions, Bilal's response reflected a survival-oriented reaction. His grief was heavily shaped by socioeconomic constraints, including below-average family income, financial hardship and disrupted family roles. As the child of an illiterate housewife and one of nine siblings (younger ones), he emphasised the practical consequences of losing the family breadwinner (his father) rather than focusing on emotional response to grief. While Bilal acknowledged the loss as devastating and sad, his focus shifted to the family's survival needs. He recalled:

> "*Actually, it's devastating, you know, because my mom is not working. So, he's the breadwinner for the family. Luckily, I have brothers, who are the others, they have just started working, but they have a big family. So, you know, the trauma is there, because I'm thinking, who's going to provide us livelihood? So, of course, I look (into the fact) that I have to support my brother*." (Bilal)

Although Bilal did not assume full financial responsibility at 13, he still helped at the family food stall and felt a strong internal pressure to contribute. His experience illustrates how the urgency of survival can delay or suppress emotional grieving, especially in contexts where societal and cultural expectations prioritise familial obligation over emotional processing. This survival-oriented grief response truly reflects an adaptation to socioeconomic constraints, where grief is not absent but is expressed through action and role fulfilment, rather than openly expressing emotions.

Coping strategies

The narratives of participants revealed a diverse range of coping strategies adopted after the death of a parent during adolescence. These strategies were shaped by developmental stage, cultural and religious beliefs, and family dynamics. The coping strategies were categorised into six major themes: Emotion-Focused Coping, Maladaptive Coping, Religious Coping, Family and Social Support, and Problem-Focused Coping. Several participants reported integrating these approaches, often shifting between strategies from adolescence into adulthood.

Emotion-focused coping

Emotion-focused coping was one of the main strategies used by participants like Cyra, Alya, and Elias to manage their distress, especially when the loss felt overwhelming. Many of them described trying not to think about death too much or avoid painful emotions, in order to stay focused on daily responsibilities such as school or caregiving. This mental effort is known as thought suppression, a type of emotional regulation that serves as a short-term buffer, allowing them to maintain daily functioning without being overwhelmed by grief. Faiz, Elias, and Bilal also shared that they intentionally blocked out thoughts about the loss to protect their emotional stability. For example, Faiz acknowledged that avoiding thoughts related to death helped him focus:

> *"I don't really let myself think about it too much. I just do things to keep myself busy. I just have repressed, I repressed all of those thoughts, I guess."* (Faiz)

Elias similarly describes his conscious attempt to block out his distressing thoughts and maintain a sense of normalcy:

"I had to keep going and not let myself think too much about her death. I don't really show people what I feel... I just try to keep going like normal " (Elias)

Moreover, Bilal's narrative revealed a strong internal drive to suppress emotional distress to focus on future goals. Rather than letting emotions (e.g., sadness) consume him, he deliberately shifted his attention to academic success and future planning. His statements reflect an ongoing negotiation between acknowledging emotional pain and choosing not to let it interfere with his goals. For him, academic performance and future stability were not only personal goals but also his moral obligation. His need to remain emotionally regulated was tied to a sense of duty toward his family. He also described how his older brother encouraged him and his siblings to pursue education seriously as a pathway to change their family's circumstances.

"But I think, no, I think what I'm doing is that we cannot change, but only we know that we need to survive… we cannot put ourselves in depression to control emotion… we have to control emotion… If you're not happy, you are very sad, I don't think that we can study… this is how I try to eliminate this negative thing…So, of course, my brother supports us… we are poor family, we are not, we cannot survive without good education… they asked me to study hard to ensure that you try to get a scholarship… because we don't have money to support you later. I need to survive. I need to study. And this is why we cannot put all the emotion to control your future" (Bilal)

This coping style blends emotional restraint with a goal-directed approach. While it may have provided a short-term functionality, protecting participants from emotional overload, it also reflects a potential avoidant coping style, where emotions are suppressed rather than processed. Nevertheless, in emotionally constrained environments (e.g. low Socioeconomic Status), such suppression appeared adaptive and culturally reinforced.

In addition to thought suppression, several participants, Bilal, Cyra, Dania, and Elias, turned to physical or self-soothing activities to cope with their emotional distress. These included journaling, crying in solitude, driving to clear their minds, engaging in sports or physical activity, or immersing themselves in routine tasks. Although these activities were less cognitively structured compared to suppression, they still served as emotional outlets that temporarily helped reduce the intensity of grief.

Overall, these narratives illustrate how emotion-focused coping helped participants regain a sense of control and maintain daily stability. However, the long-term impact of unaddressed grief, especially when emotions are consistently suppressed, could contribute to unresolved or complicated grief in adulthood, as hinted at in some of the participants' later narratives.

Maladaptive coping

Maladaptive coping emerged as a prominent theme among half of the participants (Dania, Elias, Faiz and Cyra) following the death of a parent during adolescence. These responses often offer temporary relief but pose a great risk to long-term emotional well-being and psychological healing. Participants appeared to resort to such coping when the distress of loss overwhelmed their ability to process or regulate their emotions adaptively.

In this study, maladaptive coping manifested through three interconnected categories: self-harm and pain-seeking activities, suicidal thoughts, and social withdrawal and distraction,

particularly during the earlier stages of grief during the adolescent period when participants lacked access to effective coping resources.

One of the categories involved self-harm and pain-seeking activities, notably reported by Dania and Elias. Dania described experiencing internalised anger and self-directed hatred that emerged in early adolescence. She continues to disclose episodes of physically releasing her emotions by hitting walls and later engaging in more covert forms of harm, such as scratching herself and gradually cutting her wrists. Gradually, she substituted this with behaviours like piercings and vaping during her high school time. She did not frame it purely as recreational choices but as deliberate attempts to feel pain. She recounted:

> *"Like, I throw things or sometimes like- I punch my hand into the wall. So, like that, that kind of thing la…Sometimes I pierce my ears, I could body piercings and then I want to feel the pain through these things… Things like that and there is other way I do… the things like vaping — things that can harm me, but in that not direct?"* (Dania)

While Dania clarified that she has stopped engaging in self-cutting after high school, she shared that some form of pain-seeking persisted until she sought professional help at around age 20. Her narrative illustrated a gradual transition from overt (e.g. cutting oneself, punching) to covert harm (e.g. vaping), highlighting the psychological impact of unresolved grief and the difficulty in expressing emotional distress through healthy means.

Similarly, Elias engaged in indirect self-harm by intentionally starving himself, hoping that he would die naturally. His behaviour reflected not only a form of psychological withdrawal but also a symbolic expression of hopelessness and longing to be reunited with his deceased mother and sibling. He recalled:

> *"I didn't eat for days… I just want to follow my mom and my little brother."* (Elias)

The second subtheme, suicidal thoughts, was reported by Dania, Faiz, and Elias. These thoughts did not always indicate active intent to end their life but acted as a cry for relief from the distress. Dania disclosed persistent suicidal ideation, which she continued to experience despite being on medication till her adulthood. Although she no longer engaged in self-harm behaviours, she acknowledged the ongoing internal struggle. She also explained that these thoughts were now more manageable, suggesting some degree of emotional regulation through prescribed medication and therapeutic intervention:

> *"Suicidal thoughts I still have but currently… I'm on medication… it's quite controllable right now. Sometimes I suddenly think about it, but it's still within my control."* (Dania)

On the other hand, Faiz shared that although he did not engage in self-harming behaviours, he experienced thoughts of not wanting to die during adolescence and shared them with his teacher. He also reflected that at that time, he was unaware that such thoughts were some sort of warning signs and did not seek help until much later during his adulthood:

> *"I just tell one of my teachers that I don't want to live anymore."* (Faiz)

Elias's strong desire to reunite with his deceased mother manifested as passive suicidal ideation. His thoughts centred around a wish for death, asking for divine intervention to relieve his suffering. His experience reveals a profound spiritual and existential dimension to grief, in

which death was perceived not as an escape, but as a reunion with the person he missed most.

> *"I just want to die already and be with my mom… I wish Allah would just take me away."* (Elias)

Social withdrawal and distraction were evident in the narratives of Faiz, Dania and Cyra. All three participants described efforts to distance themselves from family members or an emotionally triggering environment. Faiz reported withdrawing from social interactions and isolating himself during the early period following the loss. He recalled:

> *"I just want to be alone… I don't talk to anyone; I go to my room straight."* (Faiz)

In contrast, both Dania and Cyra leaned toward hyper-social coping through external distraction, especially with their school friends. This behaviour seemed like an attempt to avoid confronting grief in familiar spaces, such as their homes. Dania explained that she often hangs out outside with friends after school, using social engagement as a temporary escape:

> *"I just don't want to go back home... I stay outside with my friends, like all the time."* (Dania)

Similarly, Cyra described relying heavily on spending time with friends to delay facing painful emotions associated with her loss. She recalled:

> "*I always hang out with my friends… I feel okay when I am outside. When I go home, I remember everything*." (Cyra)

Although seemingly opposite in form, the behaviours of withdrawal and over-socialising reflected a shared underlying mechanism of avoidance coping. As previously discussed, these strategies served as short-term protective buffers through thought suppression, allowing participants to function in their daily lives during the grief period. However, they also delayed emotional processing and reinforced the suppression of grief. While they provided short-term psychological relief, they also highlight the critical need for early identification, intervention, and access to supportive environments that could facilitate healthier emotional regulation and long-term coping.

Religious coping

For five out of six participants, religious beliefs and practices played a central role in how they processed, coped and made sense of their loss. Three primary categories emerged: cognitive reappraisal through belief in the afterlife (*Akhirah*), engagement in spiritual practices, and religiously framed guilt. Belief in reunion in the afterlife (*Akhirah*) offered peace and reframed death as a temporary separation for many participants (e.g., Alya, Bilal, Cyra, Elias, and Faiz). Islam teaches that life continues beyond death and into the beginning of eternal life, allowing them to interpret their loss within a larger spiritual narrative. For Alya, Cyra and Elias, this belief provided reassurance that they would one day be reunited with their deceased parents. As Alya shared:

> *"I always believe that I'm gonna see her. Just like, this is just a break... for quite some time, then I'm gonna see her again."*

Similarly, Bilal described how spending time with religious mentors and friends helped affirm his belief in Divine Decree (*Qadr*). Faiz and Elias echoed this belief.

Religious practices also became a coping mechanism for the loss. Most participants turned to prayer, supplication (*Dua*), remembrance of God (*Zikr*) and faith-based routines. These practices helped participants regulate their distress, feel spiritually connected to the deceased, and draw strength from religious rituals during moments of grief.

However, not all religious coping mechanisms led to coping and healing. For some participants, religious beliefs became entangled with guilt and moral expectations. Alya shared how her father told her that being reunited with her mother depended on how morally upright and religious she was. Alya recounted:

> *"You be a solehah. Be good, good daughter… If not, you won't see your mom again."*

Although her father likely meant to encourage virtuous religious behaviour, this placed a heavy emotional burden on her, as if her grief and future reunion hinged on personal perfection. Such framing risked internalising guilt, making grief feel conditional on being "good enough."

Dania's narrative reflected the emotional conflict that can arise when religious expectations are used to explain psychological pain. When she expressed the need for professional support, her father dismissed it, attributing her struggles to a lack of *Iman* (faith). Dania shared:

> *"The stigma like… 'Oh, you didn't like pray… you didn't like zikir, that's what you get.'"*

So, instead of receiving comfort, Dania faced moral judgment, which left her feeling unseen and invalidated. The expectation to appear pious in order to justify her distress made it even harder for her to process her grief openly.

However, Dania later developed a more balanced perspective, recognising that both religion and psychological support could coexist in her healing journey:

> *"I think religion is very helpful... you feel calmer if you… not try to understand… but try to accept. Like redha."* (Dania)

Rather than trying to rationalise her pain, she leaned into acceptance, drawing comfort from her spiritual beliefs without feeling confined by them and learning to be content with Allah's decree (*redha*), even in the absence of getting an answer and understanding.

Family and social support

Family and social relationships emerged as central coping to all six participants' grieving experiences, particularly during adolescence. This relational system provided emotional security, encouraged adaptive coping, and nurtured meaning during grieving. Within this theme, three key categories were identified: the surviving parent, sibling relationships, and support from friends and their families.

For Alya, her father served as a primary emotional anchor during her bereavement. Observing his strength despite his own pain of losing his wife gave her the courage to manage her emotions and build resilience. She explained that his calm presence helped her become someone emotionally steady and dependable.

> *"I think it's because of my dad. Like I can see he is very, very super strong… I always tried to balance [my emotions] but then, I think the main source of my stable emotion is my dad."* (Alya)

While Alya leaned on her father for comfort, she also took care not to increase his emotional burden. She expressed a sense of responsibility to shield him from additional distress by regulating her own emotional needs, as she mentioned, "*I don't want to like cause him distress*." Likewise, Elias spoke about drawing strength from his surviving parent, his father, who provided direction, good advice, and stability, especially in academic focus and managing everyday responsibilities.

Supportive sibling relationships also played a critical role in the grieving process. Participants who shared close bonds with their siblings' described feelings of mutual understanding, emotional support, and validation. Bilal, Alya, and Elias each reflected on how these sibling bonds helped them navigate grief in a way that felt less isolating and more grounded in shared experience.

This theme also appeared in Alya's narrative, where her role extended beyond grieving elder sister to become an emotional anchor for her younger siblings. Her awareness of their emotional immaturity made her more determined to remain composed and dependable:

> *"I think I'm the most… I am the most understandable of the situation as compared to [my siblings]. I want them to see me as a role model and come to me and like talk about anything"* (Alya)

Beyond the family system, participants often relied on friendships and the care of their friends' parents to navigate grief. This was especially crucial for those who lacked emotionally expressive home environments. For instance, Cyra shared the support she received from a close friend's mother:

> *"I think I trust the friend's mom… They kind of like, take care of me. Instead of like, leaving me alone."* (Cyra)

For Dania, social support was more complex. Although she struggled to express herself consistently, she found one trusted best friend. But this relationship was at times strained by her fear of burdening others. She shared:

> *"I have like one best friend lah, who really I share my story with… But I'm insecure. I overthink and I feel overwhelmed with everything."* (Dania)

Family and social support emerged not merely as background context but as active coping mechanisms across the participants' grief journey. A strong surviving parent fostered strength and stability, sibling relationships provided shared meaning and solidarity, and friendships and surrogate parental figures extended emotional safety beyond the family unit. These interpersonal supports helped participants navigate through grief by minimising a sense of loneliness, finding purpose, and a sense of belonging amidst loss.

Problem-focused coping

The three participants demonstrated problem-focused coping by actively seeking professional help and engaging in self-directed learning to better understand their emotional and grieving experiences. Faiz, Dania, and Elias each described seeking professional help

during adulthood, driven by emotional overwhelm and the need for deeper understanding. For Faiz, learning about grief through therapy helped validate his emotional experience and reframe his grief through the lens of psychological understanding. Reflecting on the positive impact of learning about grief in therapy, he shared:

> *"After knowing the stages of grief, I feel, I can say I feel validated."* (Faiz)

This statement illustrates how exposure to psychoeducation provided a language for Faiz to articulate his internal experience, something he had long struggled with and marked a turning point in his grieving process.

Dania also sought therapy during her adult years following prolonged emotional struggles. While she initially went for a diagnosis, she later re-engaged with therapy as a space to process grief-related emotions and to develop healthier coping strategies. Her help-seeking behaviour reflected a long-term, problem-focused approach, even though the journey was not always linear for her.

For Elias, the decision to seek counselling was influenced by his friend and a personal issue. He described how a close friend, who had benefited from therapy, urged him to consider professional help. Initially hesitant due to cultural and gendered perceptions around help-seeking. He went on to describe the counselling sessions as emotionally cathartic and transformative. Additionally, Elias also demonstrated self-initiated learning by turning to books and online resources to better understand his grief. As he described:

> *"So, I talked to my best friend, and I was telling him of what I was going through, and he was suggesting counselling. He has been seeing a counsellor, and it has helped him so much. And us guys, we don't believe in this thing, but it definitely helped him. I talked to her for three sessions or four, I don't remember... it definitely poured out my emotions, trapped emotions like crazy. I started reading books. Psychological books... Watching YouTube... to understand. How to move on. And how to value my mom in a better way."*

This insight underscores how societal expectations around masculinity may have influenced Elias's initial hesitance, but also how peer modelling helped shift his perspective. Overall, these narratives highlight how participants utilised problem-focused coping to actively manage their grief. Seeking help from professionals and engaging in self-education serve as tools not only for survival but also as pathways to emotional clarity, behavioural change, and resilience.

Post-traumatic growth

The third major domain captures the participants' experiences of positive psychological transformation following the loss of a parent during adolescence. While the degree and nature of growth varied, five out of six participants reported one or more dimensions of post-traumatic growth. These were categorised into five themes: (1) Personal Strength, (2) Spiritual Strength, (3) Appreciation of Life, (4) New Possibilities, and (5) Relating to Others. Although some themes within the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) domain correspond with established dimensions of PTG, they were retained because they reflected participants' own descriptions of how they experienced personal, spiritual, relational, and life-priority changes after parental loss. Therefore, these themes were not treated as predetermined categories but as inductively supported patterns within participants' narratives.

Personal strength

All six participants reported significant shifts in their identity and character following their loss, particularly the development of independence, resilience, and maturity. These changes were not immediate coping responses but gradual, enduring strengths that emerged over time. Bilal, for instance, described his transformation toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency after his father's death at age 13. He shared:

> *"Even until my university life, I'm still… independent… I don't rely to my brother." "Now after you get this experience… you know that you cannot rely on each other. You know you have to survive."* (Bilal)

Alya described how surviving her mother's death became a turning point in her sense of personal strength. She shared:

> *"If I can survive my mom's death, I can do anything… then I can survive anything." "It shapes me to be more brave… like braver."* (Alya)

Over time, Alya also became more independent and assertive. She took on a protective role within the family, especially toward her younger siblings. She reflected:

> *"I become more independent and… outspoken… I know I have to protect my siblings."*

Cyra also described a similar transformation. Losing a parent, she explained, required her to mature faster and take on responsibilities beyond her age. Cyra expressed:

> *"You have to sort of like be mature earlier than your… so that you can… be someone that your siblings can… turn to or refer to… more responsible, yeah."*

Overall, these narratives reflected how personal strength, rooted in resilience and independence, was not a temporary coping mechanism but a sustained outcome of growth. The loss became a crucible that shaped enduring traits, not simply a hardship to endure but a process through which participants evolved and redefined themselves. Indeed, participants did not simply adapt to their loss; they evolved through it.

Spiritual strength

Alya, Bilal, Faiz, Cyra, and Dania said the loss of their parents deepened their spirituality and strengthened their relationship with their faith. For **Alya,** the death of her mother transformed her spiritual beliefs profoundly, reinforcing her faith in an afterlife (Akhirah). She reflected:

> *"It changed my life a lot, it changed my spiritual life… Umm like, I start to appreciate religion, like how can… You know, it connects us with the people who have passed away. We will meet again in the akhirah"* (Alya)

Similarly, Bilal and Faiz turned to spiritual frameworks to make sense of their loss. Both spoke about accepting their parents' deaths as part of *Qadr* (Divine decree):

> *"I learned to trust in Allah's plans more… it helped me to be calmer and accept whatever happened. I start to understand that everything that happens is due to the qada and qadar."* (Faiz)

Overall, the participants described stronger religious commitment, deeper belief in the afterlife, and greater emotional comfort through faith. Rather than merely coping, this spiritual strength reflected transformative meaning-making and deeper existential reflection on life and death.

Appreciation of life

For several participants, the experience of losing a parent during adolescence triggered a profound shift in how they valued life and relationships. It helped shape how they viewed family bonds, social interactions, and the value of education.

Cyra and Elias both shared how the death of a parent shifted their priorities toward spending meaningful time with loved ones**:**

> *"After my mom passed away, I realised the importance of spending quality time with people we love… because we never know what might happen tomorrow."* (Cyra)

> *"Now, I appreciate small moments much more… losing my mom made me realise life can change in a moment, so I try to be grateful for what I have."* (Elias)

Additionally, Bilal reflected that his early loss made him particularly mindful of the fragility of life. It shaped the way he interacted with others and influenced the decisions he made in relationships:

> *"Life is very short… after losing my parents, I learned to appreciate small things, people around me, and not take anything for granted."* (Bilal)

These narratives show how bereavement prompted participants to adopt a more intentional and grateful outlook on life. Rather than merely surviving grief, they found meaning in it, using it as a lens to re-evaluate what truly mattered.

New possibilities

Several participants reflected on how loss opened unexpected paths in their personal or emotional development, often leading them to reevaluate their direction and sense of purpose and prompting meaningful shifts.

Cyra shared that losing her mother at such a young age influenced her decision to pursue a career in early childhood education. She described this path not only as a professional goal but as part of a deeper healing process. She explained that it was an attempt to take a proactive step toward becoming a better parent, to break the cycle of emotional neglect, and to nurture healing. Her loss served as an intentional self-development and life planning rooted in care and responsibility.

Faiz also said losing his father prompted him to reconsider his priorities. His grieving process sparked a strong desire to better understand himself, both emotionally and intellectually. This led him to seek out personal growth opportunities that helped him process the pain more constructively, such as attending therapy. Similarly, Elias described how losing his mother motivated him to take ownership of his learning and growth.

These narratives reflect how grief can open new life paths through the pursuit of meaning, healing, and self-development. Rather than remaining confined to coping, these

participants described proactive growth. The emergence of new goals, whether in career, relationships, or identity, suggests that loss created space for transformation. For them, the grieving process was not just about adapting to absence. It was about discovering who they could become.

Relating to others

One notable dimension reported by participants was their interpersonal relationships. Parental loss appeared to foster a deeper sense of empathy, emotional sensitivity, and social awareness. Many participants described becoming more attuned to others' emotional needs, showing greater patience, compassion, and empathy. For instance, Alya shared that the loss of her mother made her more emotionally open and considerate in her interactions, especially with her family members.

Similarly, Bilal mentioned that he became more attentive and responsive to the needs of those around him, demonstrating greater intentionality in his connections with others. Dania also described a significant shift in how she related to people, particularly her younger siblings and friends. Despite her ongoing mental health challenges, she reported becoming more emotionally present and connected in her relationships as she feels like she can understand them better.

Continuing grief process: Re-grief and ongoing struggle

The Continuing Grief Process domain was treated as a distinct emergent domain because it was not part of the initial PTG framework but arose from participants' repeated descriptions of grief resurfacing during adulthood, particularly during major life events and emotionally meaningful milestones. This final domain highlights how grief can persist over time into adulthood, resurfacing unexpectedly during major, meaningful life events. Although all participants experienced the loss of a parent during adolescence, for some, grief did not remain confined to that stage of life. The re-grief phenomenon refers to the resurfacing of intense emotions tied to parental loss, often triggered by major life milestones such as graduation, birthday, marriage, childbirth, or career advancement**.**

For Dania and Cyra, these significant life transitions reignited feelings of absence and emotional pain. Dania expressed how moments like receiving her degree or celebrating her birthday evoked a deep longing for her mother's presence and pride:

> *"Sometimes, I do cry… like during special days. Like when I received my degree and I wish she was there. I think… if she were alive, she would be proud."* (Dania)

Cyra similarly shared how childbirth stirred a new wave of grief, explaining how motherhood awakened memories of her mother and left her wishing for guidance and comfort.:

> *"When I gave birth… it hit me. Like, I really wish my mom could see me. Or… that I could ask her for advice. I felt like a little girl again."* (Cyra)

These reflections illustrate that grief can re-emerge during significant moments, underscoring the lifelong impact of parental loss. Importantly, this domain shows that post-traumatic growth did not necessarily mean that grief had been resolved. Rather, participants' narratives suggested that growth and grief coexisted, where personal strength, maturity, and spiritual acceptance developed alongside continuing sadness, longing, and emotional vulnerability. Thus, the Continuing Grief Process domain adds an important layer to the

findings by highlighting parental loss during adolescence as an ongoing developmental experience rather than a time-limited event.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the lived experiences of Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence, focusing on their reactions to loss, coping strategies, and experiences of post-traumatic growth (PTG). Overall, the findings suggest that parental loss during adolescence is not a single emotional event, but an evolving developmental experience shaped by age, family roles, socioeconomic circumstances, religious meaning-making, and access to support. While participants described growth in areas such as personal strength, spirituality, appreciation of life, new possibilities, and relationships, their narratives also showed that growth did not erase grief. Instead, grief and growth appeared to coexist, particularly as grief resurfaced during later life milestones. This highlights the importance of understanding adolescent parental loss as a long-term, culturally embedded, and spiritually mediated process.

Reaction to loss

The first domain, Reaction to Loss, reflected the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses experienced by participants following parental death during adolescence. Participants described immediate reactions such as shock, numbness, denial, confusion, and emotional detachment, which are consistent with Worden's (2018) framework of grief responses and Kübler-Ross's model of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). These findings also align with previous literature on adolescent grief, which has shown that young people commonly experience disbelief, emotional withdrawal, sadness, anger, and difficulty making sense of the loss (Altinsoy, 2023; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020).

However, the findings also suggest that adolescent grief cannot be understood only through universal grief-stage models. While these models help explain common emotional responses, they do not fully capture how family hierarchy, cultural expectations, socioeconomic pressure, and survival demands shape grief. In this study, some participants were not only grieving as adolescents but were also required to function as caregivers, emotional supports, or practical contributors within the family system. This indicates that grief during adolescence may be complicated by the sudden collapse of childhood dependency and the premature expectation to become emotionally or practically responsible.

Participants such as Alya, Elias, and Cyra assumed caregiving or protective roles for their younger siblings shortly after the loss. This reflected parentification, where adolescents take on adult-like responsibilities before they are developmentally ready (Dariotis et al., 2023). Their experiences can also be interpreted through Adler's birth order theory, which suggests that eldest children may internalise responsibility and assume leadership roles within the family (Adler, 1922). In the context of bereavement, these tendencies appeared to intensify, as participants had limited space to process their own grief while also attending to the emotional or practical needs of others.

These role shifts may also be understood through Bowen's family systems theory. From this perspective, emotional suppression may function as an attempt to preserve stability within a distressed family system (Bowen, 1993). Participants who became "strong" for others were not necessarily less affected by the loss; instead, they expressed their grief through responsibility, restraint, and emotional containment. This suggests that in family-centred or

collectivist contexts, grief may be less visibly emotional but still deeply present.

In contrast, Dania's experience illustrated how the absence of emotional safety and support may intensify grief reactions. Although she lost her mother at a young age similar to Elias, her grief trajectory was shaped by a different family environment. Her middle-child position, limited emotional validation, and strained family dynamics appeared to contribute to unresolved distress and later psychological vulnerability. According to Adler's (1922) theory, middle children may experience less parental attention, which may have worsened Dania's emotional regulation (Adler, 1922). This finding suggests that age at loss alone does not determine grief outcomes. Instead, grief is mediated by the interaction between developmental stage, family role, emotional support, gendered expectations, and the availability of safe spaces for expression.

Delayed reactions were also prominent, particularly guilt and rumination. Several participants questioned their actions before or after the death, suggesting that self-blame became a way of trying to make sense of an uncontrollable loss. This aligns with Meyer-Lee et al. (2020), who noted that grief following adolescent parental death may continue to evolve and re-emerge over time. Guilt also appeared to be shaped by social and cultural expectations about how grief should be expressed (Zhou et al., 2023). For example, Alya felt judged for not crying at the funeral, while Elias continued to regret not listening to his mother's final request. These findings suggest that bereaved adolescents may not only struggle with the loss itself but also with perceived expectations surrounding the "correct" way to grieve. These responses reflect findings by Revet et al. (2020), who emphasised how unresolved emotional pain, ruminative thinking, and fear of judgment can sustain complicated grief over time. Younger participants in particular appeared more vulnerable to these patterns, highlighting the importance of developmental context. When grief occurs during early adolescence without adequate emotional support, it may contribute to long-term emotional difficulties (Erikson, 1968; Bowlby, 1988).

Bilal's response offered another important perspective. His grief was not primarily expressed through emotional disclosure, but through action, responsibility, and survival-oriented thinking. Although he acknowledged his father's death as devastating, his attention quickly shifted toward the family's financial needs and future stability. This reflects what Doka and Martin (2011) describe as instrumental grief, where mourning is expressed through problem-solving, action, and practical responsibility rather than overt emotional expression. Bilal's experience demonstrates that the absence of visible emotional expression should not be mistaken for the absence of grief.

Although Bilal was not the eldest sibling, he still assumed a helping role by assisting with the family food stall, reflecting a strong internalised sense of responsibility. His response illustrates how adolescents in economically vulnerable households may suppress or delay emotional processing to fulfil familial obligations. This can be understood through Bowlby's attachment theory, which suggests that disruptions in attachment security may activate adaptive survival behaviours, particularly when emotional safety and stability are limited (Bowlby, 1988).

His survival-oriented reaction can also be interpreted through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. When basic safety and financial security are threatened, emotional processing may take a back seat to practical survival. For Bilal, the death of the family breadwinner created immediate concerns about livelihood and education. His grief was therefore embedded within socioeconomic hardship, where the need to survive limited the

space available for emotional expression. This finding is particularly important in understanding grief among adolescents from economically vulnerable families, where mourning may be interrupted or delayed by practical responsibilities. This tendency may also be more pronounced in collectivist cultural settings, where family needs often take precedence over individual emotional expression and where grief may be managed through silent duty and resilience (Silverman et al., 2021).

Overall, the Reaction to Loss domain highlights that adolescent parental bereavement is shaped by more than emotional pain. It is also influenced by developmental vulnerability, family structure, birth order, cultural expectations, and socioeconomic demands. These findings suggest that clinicians and support systems should avoid assuming grief is only present when openly expressed. For some bereaved adolescents, grief may appear as silence, responsibility, academic focus, caregiving, or survival-oriented action.

Coping strategies

The second domain, Coping Strategies, reflected the different ways participants attempted to manage grief following the death of a parent. These included emotion-focused coping, maladaptive coping, religious coping, family and social support, and problem-focused coping in adulthood. Participants did not rely on a single strategy; instead, they shifted between coping responses depending on their developmental stage, emotional capacity, family environment, and available resources.

Emotion-focused coping was one of the most common strategies used during adolescence. Participants such as Cyra, Alya, Elias, Faiz, and Bilal described suppressing thoughts, keeping themselves busy, focusing on school, or avoiding painful memories. These responses align with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which suggests that people often use emotion-focused coping when they perceive a stressor as beyond their control. In this case, rather than trying to change the reality of the loss, the focus shifts to managing the internal emotional response. Suppression, while protective in the short term, can limit emotional processing over time, potentially leading to prolonged grief or emotional blunting (Adeyemi et al., 2025).

However, the findings suggest that emotion-focused coping was neither uniformly adaptive nor uniformly maladaptive. For some participants, thought suppression functioned as a short-term protective strategy that allowed them to continue with school, caregiving, or daily routines, consistent with the view that emotion-focused coping may help individuals regulate distress when the stressor cannot be changed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For others, prolonged suppression appeared to delay emotional processing and contribute to unresolved grief, supporting previous findings that expressive suppression may hinder emotional regulation and psychological adjustment over time (Dobrakowski et al., 2021; Wegner, 1994). This supports the idea that coping strategies should be interpreted contextually rather than classified rigidly as healthy or unhealthy.

Notably, Bilal's case illustrated a more subtle form of suppression. While others, such as Alya, Cyra, Faiz, and Elias, suppressed their emotions to avoid distress, Bilal's case was especially important in this regard. Although thought suppression is often associated with emotional rebound or later distress (Wegner, 1994), Bilal's emotional restraint was embedded within a purposeful, goal-oriented framework. He suppressed emotional expression not simply to avoid grief, but to focus on education, survival, and long-term family stability. In this sense, his coping reflected both emotional regulation and restoration-oriented functioning. This

finding complicates a purely individualistic interpretation of coping, as suppression may carry different meanings in collectivist or socioeconomically demanding contexts.

Maladaptive coping was also evident among some participants, particularly Dania, Elias, and Faiz. Their narratives included self-harm, pain-seeking behaviours, self-starvation, social withdrawal, and suicidal thoughts. These behaviours suggest that unresolved grief, when combined with limited emotional support, may be expressed through the body or through self-destructive coping. This aligns with previous research showing that bereaved adolescents who lack adequate support are at greater risk of maladaptive coping and psychological distress (Altinsoy, 2023; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). Bowlby's attachment theory further explains how losing a primary attachment figure can disrupt emotional regulation, especially during adolescence, when young people are still developing coping capacities (Bowlby, 1988). At the same time, it is important to interpret these maladaptive strategies with sensitivity. For participants such as Dania and Elias, self-harm and suicidal thoughts were not merely symptoms of pathology but expressions of overwhelming grief, emotional invalidation, and difficulty communicating pain. Elias's desire to "follow" his mother reflected not only despair but also a longing for reunion, which shows the spiritual and attachment-based dimensions of his grief. These findings suggest that bereaved adolescents need support that can recognise the meaning behind risk behaviours rather than only treating the behaviours themselves.

Religious beliefs and practices emerged as a deeply influential coping and meaning-making mechanism for five out of six participants. Rituals such as prayer, dhikr, and du'a served as structured means of soothing distress and fostering a spiritual sense of connection with Allah and the deceased parent. Belief in the afterlife (*Akhirah*) also reframed death as a temporary separation, giving participants emotional reassurance and hope for reunion. These findings mirror those of Bano et al. (2025), who highlighted the role of religious belief in meaning-making and emotional reassurance among grieving Muslims. They are also consistent with Islamic grief literature, which suggests that concepts such as *Qadr, Tawakkul,* and *Yaqin* may support acceptance, resilience, and psychological adaptation following loss (Alhafiza et al., 2022; Çınaroğlu, 2024).

However, not all religious coping was experienced as positive. Participants such as Alya and Dania encountered religiously framed guilt, where grief was interpreted through moral or spiritual expectations. For Alya, the idea of reunion with her mother was conditional upon being "good enough" in the eyes of religion, while Dania experienced judgment from her father, who attributed her distress to a lack of faith. These experiences contributed to emotional invalidation and pressure to suppress grief in order to appear spiritually devout. This duality reflects prior literature suggesting that religious coping can either support or hinder psychological adjustment depending on how religious beliefs are framed, internalised, and communicated by others (Am-Ali, 2023; Dobrakowski et al., 2021; Park, 2010). Therefore, religion should not be understood only as a coping strategy, but also as a meaning-making framework that may provide comfort when expressed compassionately yet become burdensome when interpreted rigidly or judgmentally.

Family and social relationships also served as important sources of emotional and practical support. Participants often relied on remaining parents, siblings, and even the families of close friends during their grief. Sibling relationships were especially important for those who assumed caregiving roles, as these bonds provided a sense of mutual understanding and solidarity, allowing participants to feel less isolated in their grief. For participants such as Bilal, Alya, and Elias, sibling support offered a form of shared resilience and emotional validation within the family system (Bowen, 1993). These findings affirm previous research showing that

supportive relationships can reduce emotional isolation and promote healthier adjustment among bereaved adolescents (Guanco et al., 2023; Upton, 2023). However, when family communication was limited or emotionally invalidating, grief became more isolated and difficult to process.

While most participants relied on emotion-focused strategies during adolescence, some later developed more problem-focused coping in adulthood, particularly when they had access to psychoeducation or mental health services. Faiz exemplified this shift. After years of emotional avoidance, he reported feeling validated upon learning about the stages of grief in therapy and learning healthier ways of coping. This newfound understanding helped him articulate and reframe his experience, marking a turning point in his emotional recovery. His trajectory aligns with Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model, which posits that adaptive coping involves oscillating between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented tasks (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2001). His evolution from suppression to active engagement illustrates how adaptive strategies can emerge later in life, especially when individuals have access to resources that support emotional processing and meaning-making.

Overall, the Coping Strategies domain demonstrates that bereaved adolescents may move between suppression, religious meaning-making, relational support, maladaptive behaviours, and later problem-focused coping. These strategies should not be interpreted in isolation but understood within the broader developmental, cultural, and relational contexts in which they occur.

Post-traumatic growth (PTG)

The third domain, Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), reflected participants' experiences of positive psychological transformation following parental loss. Participants described growth in areas such as personal strength, spiritual development, appreciation of life, new possibilities, and relating to others. These findings align with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG theory, which proposes that growth may occur after individuals struggle with highly challenging life events. However, the findings also show that PTG should not be understood as a simple or automatic outcome of trauma. Rather, growth appeared to emerge gradually through prolonged struggle, reflection, and meaning reconstruction.

In this study, participants such as Bilal and Alya described increased independence, resilience, and maturity following the loss. For Bilal, growth was closely tied to responsibility and survival, as his father's death pushed him to become more self-reliant and future-oriented. For Alya, the loss became a turning point that shaped her emotional strength and sense of responsibility toward her family. These findings suggest that personal strength was not merely an internal trait but developed through the demands, responsibilities, and meanings attached to the loss. This supports Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) view that PTG develops not from the traumatic event itself, but from the individual's ongoing struggle to rebuild meaning after the event.

Religious meaning-making also served as a prominent mechanism through which participants reframed their grief. Park's (2010) Meaning-Making Model is particularly relevant here, as many participants sought coherence and purpose by interpreting their loss within the framework of Qadr (Divine Decree), Tawakkul (trust in Allah), Yaqin (certainty in faith), and belief in the afterlife. For Muslim participants, meaning-making was not only psychological but also theological. Loss was often understood through concepts of divine wisdom, tests of faith, patience, and trust in Allah. These meanings allowed some participants to transform

suffering into spiritual reflection and moral growth. This aligns with Çınaroğlu (2024) findings that Islamic beliefs often help bereaved individuals reframe suffering through spiritual surrender, acceptance, and continuity beyond death.

At the same time, growth did not remove participants' grief, nor did all participants experience it equally. Dania, for example, had the lowest PTG score and continued to struggle with emotional pain and suicidal thoughts. This suggests that PTG is not a universal or guaranteed outcome of parental loss. Rather, it depends on several factors, including emotional support, coping resources, family environment, psychological vulnerability, and the individual's ability to make meaning from the loss. This is consistent with previous literature suggesting that PTG may coexist with distress and does not necessarily indicate the absence of suffering (Calhoun et al., 2010; Lundberg et al., 2023; Simsek et al., 2022).

The findings also show that PTG can coexist with unresolved or continuing grief. Some participants developed greater maturity, empathy, and spiritual awareness while still carrying sadness, longing, and guilt. This is important because presenting PTG as a purely positive outcome may unintentionally minimise the continuing pain of bereavement. In this study, PTG was better understood as a complex developmental process rather than a fixed endpoint of healing. Growth and grief were not opposites; they were intertwined parts of participants' ongoing adjustment to parental loss.

Participants also described changes in their life priorities and relationships. Some became more appreciative of education, family, and the people around them, while others developed stronger empathy toward individuals experiencing emotional pain. These changes suggest that parental loss influenced not only participants' internal worlds but also their relational and social orientations. This supports previous research suggesting that PTG may involve renewed appreciation of life, improved relationships, and new possibilities (Calhoun et al., 2010; Simsek et al., 2022). Within the present study, these changes were also shaped by Islamic and collectivist values, where gratitude, family responsibility, and service to others were meaningful parts of growth.

Continuing grief process

Although many participants reflected on personal growth after the loss, the final domain, Continuing Grief Process, showed that grief remained emotionally present into adulthood. This finding is significant because it complicates a linear understanding of recovery. Grief resurfaced during milestones such as graduation, birthdays, marriage, childbirth, and other meaningful life transitions (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). These moments did not simply remind participants of the death itself; instead, they reactivated the parent's absence in relation to new adult roles and developmental needs.

For example, Cyra's transition into motherhood renewed her longing for maternal guidance and comfort. Becoming a mother herself appeared to deepen her awareness of what she had lost, especially the opportunity to seek advice and support from her own mother. Similarly, Dania's academic achievement intensified her wish for her mother's presence and approval. These examples show that the meaning of parental loss changes across the life course. The absence that was experienced as confusion or shock during adolescence may later be re-experienced as longing during adulthood.

This continuing grief process aligns with Meyer-Lee et al. (2020), who suggested that grief following adolescent parental death may re-emerge during later developmental

transitions. The present findings support this view by showing that grief does not necessarily disappear with time. Instead, it may resurface when individuals encounter new life stages where parental presence would have been emotionally meaningful. This is especially relevant for those who lost a parent during adolescence, as many life milestones had not yet occurred at the time of loss.

The coexistence of PTG and continuing grief is one of this study's key contributions. Participants could describe strength, maturity, spiritual acceptance, and appreciation of life while still experiencing longing, sadness, and emotional vulnerability. Therefore, continuing grief should not necessarily be interpreted as failed coping or lack of growth. Rather, it may reflect the enduring nature of attachment and the ongoing reconstruction of meaning after parental loss. This is consistent with the view that post-traumatic growth can coexist with distress, and that growth does not necessarily eliminate the continuing emotional impact of trauma or bereavement (Calhoun et al., 2010; Lundberg et al., 2023; Simsek et al., 2022).

This finding also suggests that grief support should not focus only on helping bereaved adolescents "move on." Instead, support should acknowledge that grief may return at different points in life. Bereaved individuals may need different forms of support during different developmental stages, particularly when major milestones reactivate the absence of the deceased parent. This reinforces the need for long-term, developmentally sensitive grief interventions that acknowledge both growth and continuing grief.

Implications of the study

The findings from this study offer important implications for mental health professionals, educators, religious leaders, families, and community organisations working with bereaved Muslim adolescents. The results suggest that grief support should be both developmentally appropriate and culturally grounded, as participants' grief experiences were shaped by developmental stage, family roles, socioeconomic circumstances, and religious meaning-making. This is consistent with previous literature showing that adolescent grief is influenced by developmental vulnerabilities (Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023), as well as cultural and religious factors that shape how grief is expressed and understood (Adiukwu et al., 2022; Alhafiza et al., 2022). Some participants described religious values and spiritual beliefs as sources of strength, while others experienced guilt, pressure, or emotional invalidation when grief was interpreted rigidly through religious expectations. Therefore, grief support for bereaved Muslim adolescents should address not only emotional distress, but also the cultural and spiritual meanings attached to loss.

First, schools should play a stronger role in early identification and support. Teachers, school counsellors, and university counsellors should be trained to recognise grief-related difficulties such as declining academic performance, emotional suppression, irritability, social withdrawal, peer relationship difficulties, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. School counselling services, pastoral care, and youth development programmes can incorporate grief literacy to normalise grief responses and reduce shame around help-seeking (Lestari & Fitriyah, 2025; Linder et al., 2022). Since several participants described suppressing grief during adolescence in order to continue functioning in school or family life, school-based support may provide an important space for adolescents to express grief without fear of judgment. This is important because bereaved adolescents may struggle with emotional regulation and require supportive environments to process grief safely (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023).

Second, mosques and Muslim community organisations can provide culturally

meaningful support for bereaved adolescents and families. Religious leaders may help bereaved individuals understand Islamic concepts such as Sabr, Qadr, Tawakkul, Yaqin, and belief in the afterlife in ways that provide comfort, hope, and acceptance. When communicated compassionately, Islamic beliefs may support resilience and meaning-making after loss (Alhafiza et al., 2022; Çınaroğlu, 2024). However, the findings also show that religious messages must be communicated with sensitivity. When grief is framed too rigidly as a test of faith, bereaved adolescents may feel guilty, silenced, or spiritually inadequate. Therefore, collaboration between religious leaders and mental health professionals is recommended so that faith-based support can be integrated with emotional validation, psychoeducation, and appropriate referral pathways (Bano et al., 2025; Elfattah, 2025).

Third, mental health practitioners should provide culturally competent and spiritually sensitive grief interventions. Western grief models may offer useful frameworks, but they may not fully reflect the lived realities of Muslim adolescents whose grief is shaped by Islamic beliefs, collectivist family roles, and cultural expectations surrounding emotional expression (Alhafiza et al., 2022; Lundberg et al., 2023). Practitioners should explore how clients understand the loss through their faith, whether religious beliefs provide comfort or distress, and how family dynamics influence coping. This is especially important for adolescents who experience maladaptive coping, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or unresolved guilt. Interventions should therefore combine emotional validation, grief psychoeducation, risk assessment, safety planning, and culturally sensitive meaning-making.

Fourth, family-based support should be strengthened. Surviving parents and siblings may need psychoeducation on how to communicate about death, validate grief, and recognise signs of emotional distress. Families should also be encouraged to avoid placing excessive caregiving or emotional responsibilities on bereaved adolescents, especially when the adolescent is already struggling with their own grief. Since several participants assumed adult-like roles after the loss, family interventions may help redistribute responsibilities and create space for adolescents to mourn, express emotions, and receive support. This is particularly important because family support can reduce emotional isolation and promote healthier coping among bereaved adolescents (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Lestari & Fitriyah, 2025).

Finally, community health systems should develop accessible referral pathways for bereaved adolescents. This may include collaboration between schools, mosques, counselling centres, community clinics, and non-profit organisations. Bereaved adolescents who show signs of complicated grief, self-harm, suicidal ideation, or prolonged emotional distress should be referred to adolescent-friendly and culturally sensitive mental health services. Importantly, support should not end shortly after the death. Because this study found that grief may resurface during later-life milestones, long-term support should be available across developmental stages, including transitions such as graduation, marriage, parenthood, and career development. This is consistent with Meyer-Lee et al. (2020), who highlighted that grief following adolescent parental loss may re-emerge during significant life events.

Overall, this study highlights the need for grief interventions that are culturally sensitive, practical, collaborative, and developmentally informed. Effective bereavement support for Muslim adolescents requires the involvement of multiple systems, including families, schools, mosques, mental health professionals, and community health services. Such an approach may help reduce stigma, promote healthy emotional expression, support religious meaning-making, and foster both immediate coping and long-term resilience.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should explore grief experiences across more diverse Muslim populations, including individuals from different ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, family structures, and levels of religiosity. As the present study involved a small sample of Muslim adults from Malay and Burmese backgrounds, future studies could include broader Muslim communities to examine how cultural traditions, family expectations, and religious practices shape grief, coping, and post-traumatic growth in different contexts. This would help strengthen the cultural relevance of grief research beyond Western-oriented bereavement frameworks (Alhafiza et al., 2022; Lundberg et al., 2023).

Future studies should also examine adolescents who are currently experiencing parental loss, rather than relying only on retrospective accounts from adults. Although retrospective narratives provide valuable insight into the long-term impact of adolescent bereavement, they may not fully capture the immediate and developmentally specific challenges faced during adolescence. Bereaved adolescents may experience difficulties such as declining academic performance, emotional dysregulation, social withdrawal, peer relationship problems, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, particularly during the early stages of grief (Altinsoy, 2023; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023). Studying adolescents in real time would therefore provide a more developmentally grounded understanding of their emotional responses, coping strategies, school functioning, social relationships, and mental health needs. Such research may inform timely interventions appropriate for adolescents in school, family, community, and clinical settings.

Longitudinal research would also be valuable in understanding how grief evolves from adolescence into adulthood. The present findings showed that grief may resurface during later milestones such as graduation, marriage, parenthood, and career development. Therefore, future longitudinal studies could examine how re-grief, coping strategies, religious meaning-making, and post-traumatic growth change across different life stages. This is important because grief following adolescent parental death may not remain static but can re-emerge during later developmental transitions (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020).

Additionally, future research should give more attention to underrepresented groups, including bereaved adolescents with limited family support, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those with mental health diagnoses, and those who experience tension between religious expectations and emotional distress. These perspectives would deepen understanding of varied grief trajectories and help identify which individuals may be most vulnerable to complicated grief or maladaptive coping. Given that emotional support and family environment can influence coping outcomes, further research should examine how protective and risk factors operate across different Muslim family and community contexts (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Lestari & Fitriyah, 2025).

Finally, quantitative or mixed-method approaches may complement qualitative findings by examining patterns of coping, PTG, complicated grief, religious meaning-making, and psychological distress among larger samples. Such approaches may strengthen the generalisability of findings while preserving the depth and contextual sensitivity needed to understand grief among Muslim adolescents and adults (Altinsoy, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study explored the reactions to loss, coping strategies, and post-traumatic growth

of Muslim adults who lost a parent during adolescence. Using a phenomenological approach, the findings showed that adolescent parental loss is not a singular or time-bound event, but a deeply personal, developmental, relational, and culturally shaped experience. Participants' grief was expressed through immediate reactions such as shock, numbness, denial, and guilt, but also through delayed grief, survival-oriented responsibility, emotional suppression, religious coping, and continuing grief into adulthood.

The study also highlighted the complex role of religion in Muslim bereavement. Islamic beliefs and practices, including *Qadr*, *Tawakkul*, *Yaqin*, prayer, and belief in the afterlife, provided comfort, acceptance, hope, and meaning for many participants. However, religion could also become a source of guilt or emotional pressure when grief was interpreted rigidly or when distress was viewed as a weakness of faith. The dual role of religion as both a source of comfort and a potential barrier to emotional expression or help-seeking underscored the need for culturally tailored grief support.

These findings call for more culturally sensitive grief interventions and greater awareness among clinicians and community leaders of the long-term emotional impacts of adolescent parental loss. Culturally informed interventions should prioritise emotional validation, reduce stigma around grief and professional help, and create supportive environments that not only foster immediate healing but also promote long-term emotional growth and resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sincerely thank the participants for their invaluable support and contribution. This research was conducted without any financial assistance or external funding.

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