

## PERCEPTION OF TIME PERSPECTIVE IN WIDOWS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS DURING THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE LOSS

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### ABSTRACT

**The aim:** The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the loss of a loved one on the perception of subjective time as well as analyse the changes occurring during the psychological care programme, in which special attention was given to finding a new meaning in life.

**Materials and methods:** The study was undertaken with 240 wives of deceased law enforcement officers. The age of the respondents ranged from 28 to 56 years. According to the results of the analysis of personal data and interviews obtained during the empirical study, experimental and control groups were formed – 32 women who had been widows for up to one year and expressed a desire to receive psychological assistance formed an experimental group (EG), while 34 others formed a control group (CG). They subsequently participated in the formative part of the experiment which provided 10 months of psychological support with preliminary and repeated psycho-diagnostic testing.

**Results:** The article theoretically analyses studies by foreign and domestic experts on a person's perception of his psychological time under the influence of emotional trauma. It presents the results of a comparative experimental psychological examination of the widows of law enforcement officers to determine the tendency for changes in the perception of the time perspective while experiencing grief.

**Conclusions:** A break caused by a loss, especially that of a loved one, disrupts a holistic view of life. Such breaks result in mental health problems, which in turn impact social relations and social realisation. Timely psychological assistance helps solve problems of legitimising behavioural change and accumulating resources for adapting to changing life scenarios.

**KEY WORDS:** bereavement, time perspective, widows, grief, loss

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### INTRODUCTION

Everyone, sooner or later, must deal with losing their loved ones. Loss causes grief and suffering, which can lead to significant psychological and physiological problems with long-term consequences [1-6] on multiple levels, which manifest in the emotional, cognitive and behavioural spheres. The individual begins to experience a new psychological reality which requires adaptation to new conditions of existence.

Grief is a normal process and one adapts to it over time, experiencing certain stages and reorganising their life. Loss impairs the mental health of the individual to varying degrees.

However the reorganisation of life and the degree of well-being depend on many factors. In this article, we will consider one such factor, which in our opinion, is the main one – the impact of loss on the perception of subjective time.

Previous research has shown that subjective perception of time has qualitative differences from objective astronomical time. People in general are characterized by individual features of the sense of time: the quantity of events or their absence, slow or dynamic time, smooth or jerky time. The revealed relationship between the past, present and future, when a person experiences the present, is associated with thoughts about the future and memories of the past' [3]. Thus, thoughts of the present, filled with pain and suffering, affect the development of the future, particularly the form it will take and one's future self-perception. This process may be harmful for one's current mental health.

Even Michael Bury proved that suffering and illness are special kinds of destructive experiences. At the same time, such suffering during the search for new patterns of existence enables one to find a deeper meaning of experience [1].

It is difficult to find such meaning while experiencing emotional tumult, mental disorientation and a flood of memories. The death of a loved one can engender an existential crisis and lead to a spiritual search [7]. There is then a gradual transformation of meaning structures, which is reflected in one's self-perception [5] and future.

Recently, an increasing number of studies confirm the positive effect of psychological intervention regarding bereavement and for the prevention of pathological manifestations of grief [4, 6]. However, at the same time, while there is frequent emphasis on the need to reorganise life without the deceased and to learn to set goals for a future without them, research to study the perception of past, present and future after the loss of a loved one is lacking.

## THE AIM

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the loss of a loved one on the perception of subjective time, as well as to analyse the changes inspired by a program of psychological care in which special attention is paid to finding a new meaning in life.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A study was undertaken in 2015–2019, in which a set of diagnostic, corrective and therapeutic methods was used to verify the theory and prepare a practical guideline. The study was conducted on 240 widows of deceased law enforcement officers. The age of the respondents ranged from 28 to 56 years: < 30 years – 12 people, 31–49 years – 213 people, > 50 years – 5 people.

According to the results of the analysis of personal data and interviews obtained from the respondents, experimental and control groups were formed – 32 women who had been widows for up to one year and expressed a desire to receive psychological assistance formed an experimental group (EG), while 34 others formed a control group (CG). They subsequently participated in the formative part of the experiment, which provided 10 months of psychological support with preliminary and repeated psycho-diagnostic testing.

To analyse the impact of loss on the perception of time, the Zimbardo Time Perspective Questionnaire (ZTPI) was chosen. This technique is aimed at diagnosing the system of personality relations to the time continuum.

Time perspective is a subjective perception of the psychological concepts of the past, future and present, whereby time and its manifestations are imbued with psychological meaning. There is an individual tendency to remain preoccupied with a particular time period, resulting in an orientation towards either the past, present or future.

The questionnaire consists of 56 items, and the answers are classified according to a 5-point Likert scale. The study investigated five indicators: the factors of perception of (a) the negative past, (b) positive past, (c) hedonistic present, (d) fatalistic present and (e) degree of future orientation.

The obtained data was analysed using the program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 23.

The calculation and comparison to determine the factor incremental value from the first test to the second were performed according to Student's t-test.

The test and retest were separated by an interval of 12 months, and the result was determined by comparing the indicators of the experimental and control groups.

## RESULTS

Respondents of both groups showed an identical orientation during the initial study.

Negativism is usually associated with guilt as well as an 'unrealised life' or individual subjective reconstruction of events (did not pay enough attention, did not like, did not go fishing, etc). Orientation towards the 'negative past' was observed in 28.1% of the respondents in the EG and 32.3% in the CG (Figure 1, Figure 3).

The ones who orient themselves towards the 'hedonistic present' have the ability to have fun 'here and now', or in the current moment. No respondent from either group demonstrated this, however.

'Emphasis on the future' is the ability to plan and succeed but also a source of anxiety. The future affects decision-making and the choice of action. This tendency was seen in 6.25% of the respondents in the EG and 1.2% in the CG (Figure 1, Figure 3).

The 'positive past' has an emotional colouration since it relates to subjective reality rather than an objective reconstruction of past events – it provides an escape from reality. A harmonious combination of future orientation and a positive perception of the past is interpreted as the search of own resources for achieving goals. This was witnessed in 15.6% of those in the EG and 25% in the CG (Figure. 1, Figure. 3).

Those oriented towards the 'fatalistic present' have a high risk of personal pathology, such as depression or anxiety. It was exhibited by 50% of the respondents in the EG and 38.2% in the CG (Figure 1, Figure 3).

After the initial study, psychological assistance – a dynamic construct to guide a person through the clinical stages of grief and loss – was offered to the women in the programme. Psychological assistance is also systematised and easy to plan; it remains focused on the mental state, does not limit the psychologist to choosing between psycho-corrective and psycho-therapeutic measures and has a clear methodology.

The fact that law enforcement psychologists had the opportunity to communicate with the family of the deceased while notifying them of the death, made psychological assistance possible at an early stage of grief.

## UNIT – 'CRISIS SUPPORT'

This stage denotes the end of the stage of shock, numbness, terror or protest, and the transition to the stage of psychogenic response to acute grief.

The main tasks include gathering information, determining the dynamics of mental states and helping the client

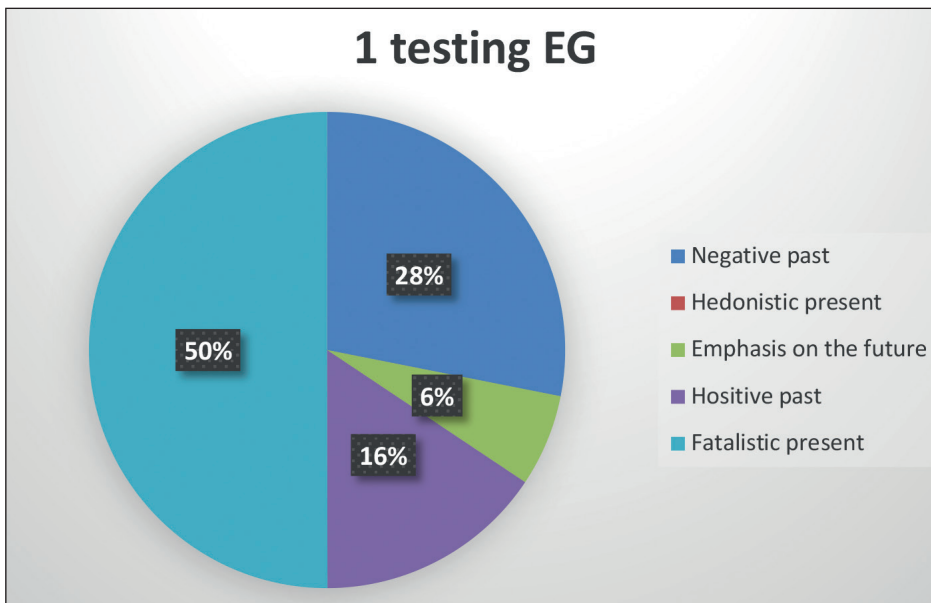


Fig. 1. First test in the experimental group

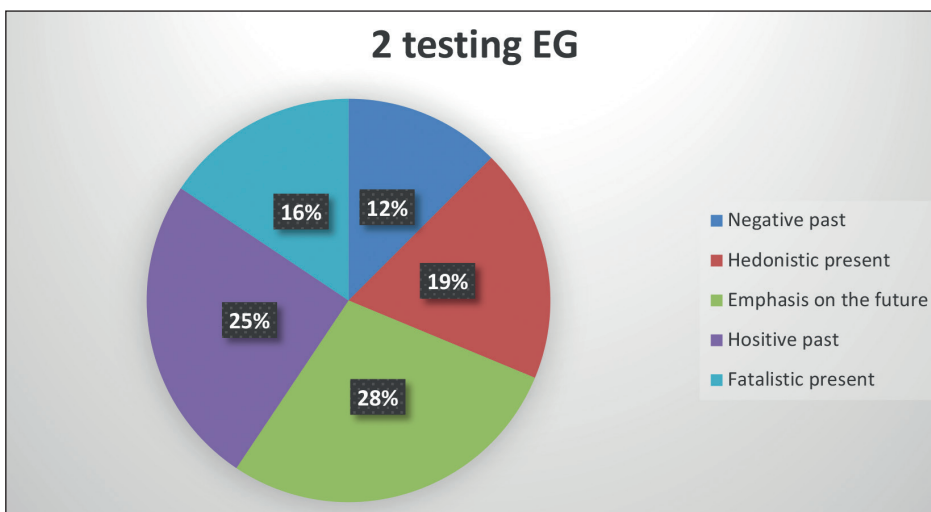


Fig. 2. Second test in the experimental group

verbalise thoughts accumulated during the period of trauma. Thus, the ability to express emotions, the level of adaptability, openness and even suicidal ideation are diagnosed.

The methodology of working with a pathological reaction constitutes a psychodynamic approach within the framework of general psychoanalytic theory. Thus, the work on pathological reactions is based on the general principles of psychoanalytic theory, relying specifically on the theory of personality, which applies to both the norm and the pathology.

Form of work – individual and group.

#### UNIT – ‘SEARCH FOR A NEW MEANING’

At this stage, there is a search for the meaning of the situation. Although the trauma of death destroys a part of oneself, it makes the gifts of destiny appear more prominent – there is development of such qualities that would not have appeared under more favourable circumstances, but the acceptance of these ‘gifts’ is possible only by accepting the loss.

The methodology of work draws from the domain of existential psychology through the basic knowledge of human existence.

Form of work – individual.

#### UNIT – ‘REORGANISATION OF LIFE AND THE ORGANISATION OF A NEW SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT’

At this stage, we offer psychotherapy for reconstructing the future and preventing the recurrence of negative experiences from the past and present in the future.

The methodological basis of this block is a combination of concepts from behaviourism and cognitivism.

Form of work – individual and group.

The time perspective of the participants changes, as shown by the dynamics of indicators in Figure 3. During the period of participation in the psychological support programme, the orientation towards the future increases

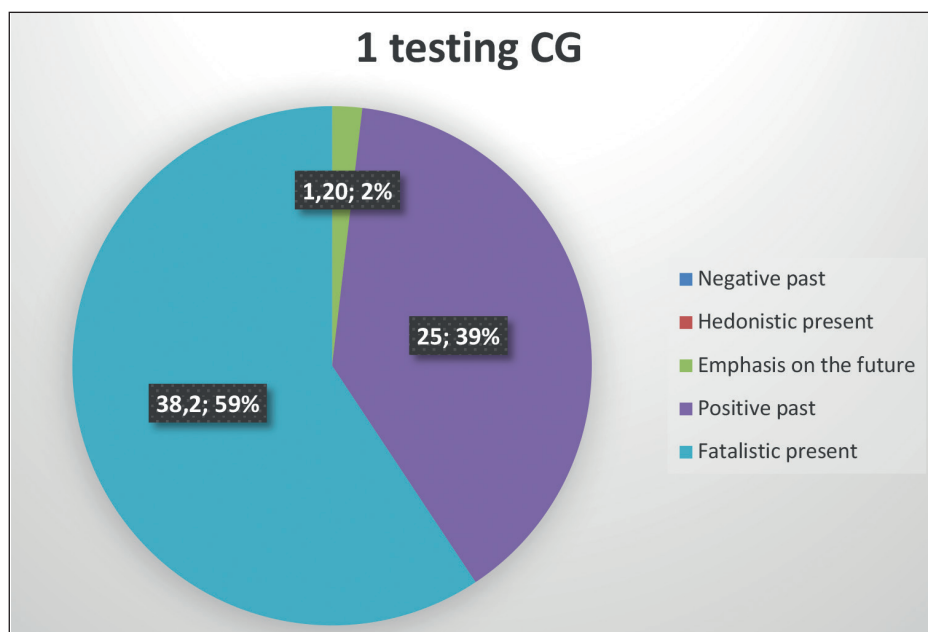


Fig. 3. First test in the control group

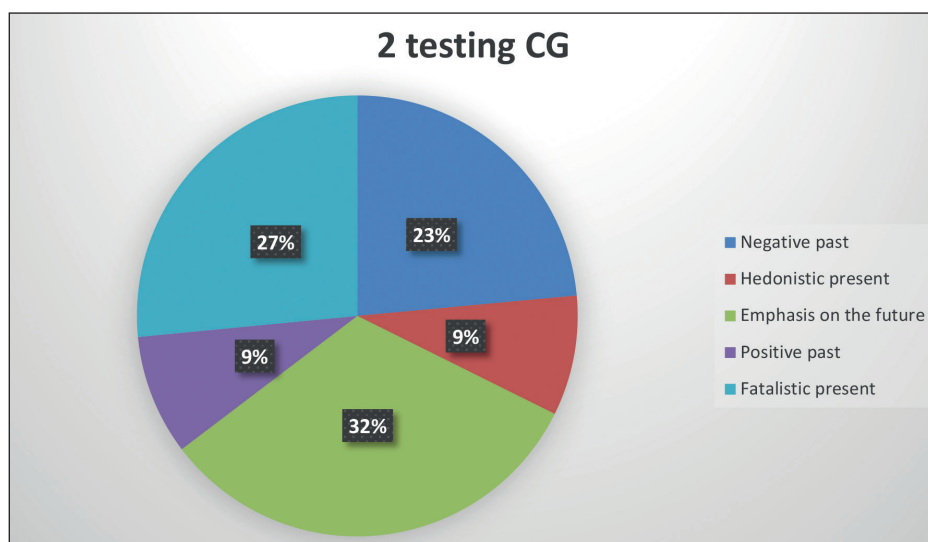


Fig. 4. First test in the control group

steadily whereas the fatalistic attitude towards the present, along with positive or negative perception of the past, diminishes.

During the retest, the indicators for orientation towards the ‘negative past’ changed by 12.5% and 23.5% respectively (Figure 2, Figure 4).

Negativism is usually associated with guilt as well as an ‘unrealised life’ or individual subjective reconstruction of events (did not pay enough attention, did not like, did not go fishing, etc). During the retest, orientation towards the ‘hedonistic present’ was observed in 18.75% of the respondents in the EG and 8.8% in the CG (Figure. 2, Figure. 4). The ones who orient themselves towards the ‘hedonistic present’ have the ability to have fun ‘here and now’, or in the current moment. This may be viewed as a positive return to life.

‘Emphasis on the future’, in the retest, is seen in 28.1% of the respondents in the EG and 32.3% in the CG (Figure

2, Figure 4). It is the ability to plan and succeed but also a source of anxiety. The future affects decision-making and the choice of action.

The focus on the ‘positive past’ changed for respondents in the EG from 15.6% to 25%, and from 25% to 8.8% for those in the CG (Figure 2, Figure 4). Thus, the indicators decreased in one group and increased in the other. The past has an emotional colouration since it relates to subjective reality rather than an objective reconstruction of past events – it provides an escape from reality. A harmonious combination of future orientation and a positive perception of the past is interpreted as the search of own resources for achieving goals.

During the retest, the indicators for an orientation towards the ‘fatalistic present’ changed significantly – it was observed in 15.6% of respondents in the EG and 26.5% in the CG (Figure. 2, Figure. 4). Those oriented towards the ‘fatalistic present’ have a high risk of personal pathology,

such as depression or anxiety. This shows that a significant number of women have now ceased to consider themselves disadvantaged and given up 'obeying fate'.

We would also like to emphasise that 5% of the respondents had a balanced time perspective.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the perception of subjective time after the loss of a loved one and charted the change in perception for a year after the loss, with psychological support and through independent experience.

In our research, we assume that the loss of a loved one is an especially debilitating experience that affects the overall perspective of life and mental health. Perhaps the perception of one's future is associated with the general ability to adapt when experiencing difficult life situations. However, we did not set ourselves the goal of studying the relationship between the level of adaptation, perception of subjective time, peculiarities of the coping strategies chosen when experiencing loss and transformation of the concept of self [5, 6]. Instead, we observed the changes that took place and evaluated the effectiveness of the psychological intervention.

Once again, we focus on the value of psychological intervention in the first few months after the loss. The magnitude of impact of the loss, manifested by the grief symptoms, is usually less, and calls into question the value of the results [2]. However, even minor positive trends give the hope that people who are experiencing bereavement will be able to shift their focus from the past to the future, with systemic psychological support. At the same time, they will be able to turn their attention to the present, thus reducing the level of influence of external factors on the perception of one's life and its fatality. They will eventually regain control over their lives and find resources for setting goals and building a future perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

A break caused by a loss, especially that of a loved one, disrupts a holistic view of life. It results in mental health problems, which in turn impact social relations and social realization. Timely psychological assistance helps solve problems of legitimising behavioural change and accumulating resources for adapting to changed life scenarios.

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## Conflict of interest:

*The Authors declare no conflict of interest*

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