

The Harm of the Grief Narrative Among Parents of Transgender and Nonbinary Youth

Russell B. Toomey¹, Lizette Trujillo², Roberto Abreu³, Ari Rios Garza¹, Sydney Hainsworth¹, and Zhenqiang Zhao⁴
(1) University of Arizona, (2) Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, (3) University of Florida, (4) Fordham University

Introduction

- The grief and loss narrative is frequently invoked to understand the experiences of parents of transgender and non-binary (TNB) youth (Abreu et al., 2019; Catalpa & McGuire, 2018; Lev, 2024; Wahlig, 2015).
- Parents' experiences of loss and grief have been reported to be the main roadblocks to family resilience and support of TNB youth (Abreu et al., 2019; Lev, 2004; Zamboni, 2006).
- Parents report experiencing these feelings due to the lack of information about TNB identities and experiences (Field & Mattson, 2016), including misinformation about the irreversibility of affirming procedures (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2022).
- Only one-third of TNB youth report that their homes are affirming (Trevor Project, 2021); yet, family acceptance is associated with better mental health and well-being (Giammattei, 2015; Simons et al., 2013; Travers et al., 2012) and better family relationships (Kuvallanka et al., 2014).
- Given how prevalent the grief narrative is in family support spaces for parents of TNB youth, it is critical to understand how this narrative impacts TNB youths' development and mental health.

Purpose

- The purpose of the study was to examine the association between TNB youths' awareness of their parents' sense of grief surrounding their TNB identity and their own well-being (anxiety, depression, and suicide thoughts and behaviors).
- We hypothesized that TNB who more frequently heard that their parents were grieving them because they are TNB would report poorer well-being (i.e., higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, and greater likelihood of suicide thoughts and behaviors).

Sample

The sample, recruited by Qualtrics Panel Services, included 319 TNB youth aged 13 to 22 years ($M = 18.64$, $SD = 2.18$). The majority of youth identified as nonbinary (77.1%) and plurisexual (73.4%), and nearly half of the sample included youth of color (42.6%). See Table 1 for more comprehensive descriptive information about the sample.

Measures

- Parental Grief (1 item):** "How often do member(s) of your family tell you that they are grieving because you are trans?" Response options ranged from Never (1) to Many Times (4).
- Suicide Thoughts & Behaviors (2 items):** "During the past 12 months, have you [seriously thought of taking]/ [attempted to take] your own life?" Response options included No (0) and Yes (1).
- Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms (PROMIS Short Form measures; Quinn et al., 2014; $\alpha = .95/.95$).**
- Control Variables:** Level of disclosure to parents (1 item); internalized transnegativity (Hidalgo et al., 2019; 8 items; $\alpha = .89$); family acceptance (Miller et al., 2020; 4 items; $\alpha = .75$); gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and age.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample ($N = 319$)

Demographic Characteristics and Study Variables	n / M	% / SD
Current Gender Identity		
Nonbinary (e.g., nonbinary, gender fluid, gender queer)	246	77.1%
Man (e.g., man, boy, transman, transmasculine, transboy)	74	23.2%
Woman (e.g., woman, girl, transwoman, transfem, transgirl)	32	10%
Multiple Categories (e.g., nonbinary transfem, genderfluid femme)	50	15.7%
Sexual Identity		
Plurisexual (e.g., pansexual, bisexual, queer, omniseual)	234	73.4%
Monosexual (e.g., gay, lesbian, straight)	85	26.6%
Racial/Ethnic Identity		
Youth of Color	136	42.6%
Black	47	14.7%
Indigenous/Native American	7	2.2%
Asian	20	6.3%
Latinx/Hispanic	56	17.6%
Middle Eastern/North African	3	0.9%
Multiracial/ethnic	29	9.1%
White	183	57.4%
Age (range: 13-22)	18.64	2.18
Outness to Parents (range: 1-4)	2.46	1.34
Internalized Transnegativity (range: 1-5)	2.66	1.06
Family Acceptance (range: 1-4)	1.48	1.25
Parental Grief (range: 1-4)	1.79	1.12
Depression (range: 1-5)	3.13	1.14
Anxiety (range: 1-5)	2.96	1.18
Suicide Ideation	198	62.1%
Suicide Attempt	72	22.6%

Note. Current gender identity, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identity were assessed with open-ended response questions and coded for quantitative analysis. Categories were not mutually exclusive and total frequencies sum above 100%.

Results

- Two structural equation models invoking full information maximum likelihood for missing data (< 5%) were tested to examine the associations between grief and well-being. Model 1 examined anxiety and depressive symptoms and Model 2 examined suicide thoughts and behaviors. Table 2 displays the results.

Table 2. Findings Predicting Trans and Nonbinary Youth Well-Being from Reports of Parental Grief

	Model 1		Model 2	
	$X^2(249) = 574.07$; RMSEA = .06 (.05, .07); SRMR = .04; CFI = .93		$X^2(20) = 43.19$; RMSEA = .06 (.04, .09); SRMR = .06; CFI = .83	
	Anxiety Symptoms β , b(se)	Depression Symptoms β , b(se)	Suicide Thoughts O.R., b(se)	Suicide Attempt O.R., b(se)
Parental Grief	0.29, 0.30 (.06)***	0.18, .18 (.06)***	1.11, 0.11 (.07)	1.22, 0.20 (.07)**
Man ^a	0.06, 0.16 (.15)	-0.00, -0.01 (.14)	0.95, -0.05 (.17)	1.13, 0.12 (.19)
Woman ^a	0.02, 0.09 (.20)	0.01, 0.05 (.20)	0.98, -0.02 (.24)	1.26, 0.23 (.26)
Plurisexual Identity ^b	-0.04, -0.09 (.14)	-0.07, -0.18 (.13)	0.98, -0.02 (.16)	0.66, -0.41 (.18)*
Youth of Color ^c	-0.04, -0.10 (.14)	-0.03, -0.06 (.12)	1.04, 0.04 (.15)	1.55, 0.44 (.16)**
Age	-0.04, -0.02 (.03)	-0.05, -0.02 (.03)	0.96, -0.04 (.03)	1.01, 0.01 (.04)
Outness to Parents	-0.18, -0.15 (.05)**	-0.15, -0.13 (.05)**	0.95, -0.05 (.06)	0.97, -0.03 (.07)
Internalized Transnegativity	0.31, .34 (.06)***	0.33, 0.36 (.06)***	1.38, 0.32 (.06)***	1.31, 0.27 (.07)***
Family Acceptance	-0.05, -0.09 (.10)	-0.12, -0.21 (.10)*	0.72, -0.33 (.10)***	0.86, -0.15 (.13)

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ^aNonbinary identity was the referent group for gender identity. ^bMonosexual identity (i.e., gay, lesbian) was the referent group for sexuality. ^cWhite was the referent group for racial/ethnic identity.

Conclusions and Implications

- Awareness of parental grief by TNB youth was consistently associated with poorer well-being, except for suicide ideation; grief was associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms and greater likelihood of suicide behaviors.
- Many parents report feeling grief and loss as an initial reaction to learning that their child is TNB (Abreu et al., 2019), and this study finds that the TNB youths' awareness of these reactions contribute to poorer mental health and well-being.
- Limitations:** The survey was cross-sectional and relied solely on youth reports with limited measurement properties (i.e., only a single item to assess awareness of grief). Future studies would benefit from a longitudinal, family-based, multi-reporter method and more comprehensive measurement of parental grief.
- Implications:** Current clinical and community-based practices that frame family reactions and responses to learning that a child is TNB should be adapted to reduce a focus on grief and loss and instead focus on the integration of the child's gender identity and expression within the family context and the loss of cisgender privilege for the youth.

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