

## COPING STRESS POST-MORTAL SPOUSE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SINGLE MOTHERS

Merri Hafni<sup>1</sup> and Sairah Sairah<sup>2</sup>

Lecture at Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Universities Medan Area, Medan, Indonesia<sup>1,2</sup>

IJMSSSR 2021

VOLUME 3

ISSUE 2 MARCH – APRIL

ISSN: 2582 - 0265

**Abstract:** The aims of this study to describe the post-death stress of a partner and the coping strategies used by working single mothers. The research approach used a qualitative descriptive with a case study design. Characteristics of single mothers, who working and having children. Data obtained through interviews with the relevant participants along with significant other interviews. The data analysis in this research is thematic data analysis technique.

The results showed that the participants experienced stress symptoms in the form of increased blood pressure, frequent postponement of work, irritability, diet changes, and sleep disturbances. The source of stress for each part is an depreciation of economic, social, and psychological resources. The stress coping strategies used by the participants included; planful problem solving, confrontative, seeking for social support, distance, escape/avoidance, positive response, self-control, and acceptance responsibility.

**Keywords:** coping stress, working single mother, post-death stress of a partner

### BACKGROUND

Various unpredictable problems and calamities in the family can cause schism in the family. The most common separations in households are death and divorce. The death of a spouse in a family is an event that can interfere with emotional life, change an individual's relationship with his social environment and problems in life after being abandoned by a partner (Belsky, 2013 ). Glazer, et al. (2010) argued that death has an impact on changing parenting patterns and the relationships faced by couples who are still living with others and themselves ( Pitasari & Cahyono, 2014). A person who is in a state of losing this spouse is usually called a single parent.

Hurlock (2011 ), stated that single parents who have been widowed or widowed either father or mother, assuming the responsibility to care for their children after the death of their spouse, divorce or the birth of a child outside of marriage (Fatimah & Nurdin, 2015). The single parent here who is more frequently encountered is a single mother who is single and has a number of dependents. Single parents are often caused by the death of their husband, divorce, unmarried mothers and teenagers who become pregnant outside of marriage (Aprilia, 2013).

For a mother, losing her husband is a very tough challenge. This can have various kinds of effects, both physical and psychological for a mother. A single parent tends to be busy with office work, busy taking care of children, lack of rest time, even eating irregularly, and this often happens to single parents whose husbands died (Negeri, 2013). After the death of a partner, the mother experiences a problem in carrying out parenting functions, namely the loss of psychological and economic support from the husband, changes in status, role, and identity crises, and emotional disturbances, loneliness, feeling helpless, hopeless, and loss. Self- confidence (Budiana & Amalia, 2015 ).

The individual who can survive this bad situation so that he prefers to overcome or minimize the problem, it means that the individual is trying to carry out a self-defense mechanism or it can also be called a coping strategy (Papalia, et al., 2013 ). Coping is a process where a person tries to manage the perceived differences between the demands and the resources they value in stressful situations (Pitasari & Cahyono, 2014). Coping efforts are very important for correcting or controlling a problem, as well as helping someone change their perception of incompatibility, tolerance or acceptance of threats or harm, or to escape or avoid situations (Lazarus & Folkman, in Sarafino 2012 ). From several previous studies it was found that single mothers as research subjects who experience stress are single mothers who are working (Kusumastuti, 2014; Pitasari & Cahyono, 2014; Asilah

& Hastuti, 2014; Nisa & Lestari, 2016).

Based on the explanation above, this study was conducted for knowing the post-death stress description of a partner and the coping strategies used by working single mothers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Single mother

Qaimi (2012) stated that a woman as a single parent is a situation where a woman will occupy two positions at once, namely as a mother which is a natural position and as a father. He will have two forms of attitude, as a woman and a mother who must be gentle towards their children, and as a father who is manly and has the duty to control the rules and regulations, and play a role as an enforcer of justice in domestic life. Stressful behavior raised by single mothers is crying, depression, and feeling inferior to their status (Naufaliasari & Andriani, 2013).

### Stress

Single mother stress is the pressure experienced as a result of a source of stress that occurs in a family who has died one of the partners. Stress is a condition caused by the discrepancy between the desired situations with the state of the biological, psychological or social system (Sarafino, 2015). Individual changes due to stress can be grouped into three general categories, namely physical symptoms, psychological symptoms, and behavioral symptoms (Robbins & Judge, 2012). The initial effects of stress are usually physical symptoms. Stress can cause changes in metabolism, increase heart rate, raise blood pressure, cause headaches, and trigger heart attacks. Psychological symptoms of stress can cause dissatisfaction in working, tension, anxiety, irritability, boredom, and procrastination.

Subsequent symptoms caused by stress related to behavior include changes in productivity, absenteeism, and employee turnover, changes in eating habits, smoking patterns, alcohol consumption, fast talking, restlessness, and sleep disturbances (Robbins & Timothy, 2016). Sources of stress that have the potential to cause stress are conflicts, life changes, and daily quarrels. This study focuses on indicators of life change using the theory of sources of stress proposed by Atkinson (2011) in looking the factors can cause stress to single mothers after their husbands die. The response can be in the form of a positive or negative response. However, in practice, there tends to be a more dominant negative response. According to Sarafino (2012) the response stress include; anxiety; anger and aggression; apathy and depression; and cognitive impairment.

### Coping Strategy

Coping is a process by which individuals manage the demands of a person-environment relationship that are assessed as stress and the emotions they produce. Coping is an effort to change thoughts or actions to manage internal and external demands which are considered heavy and exceed the resources owned by the individual. According to Robbins & Judge (2012), coping is a process in which individuals try to manage the existing distance between demands (both demands from individuals and demands from the environment) and the resources they use in facing a stressful situation. According to Robbins & Judge (2012), coping has two main functions, namely problem-focused coping and emotional-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is an approach to reduce the demands of stressful situations or expand resources to deal with them. A problem-focused approach is used when they believe that their resources or demands are in a situation that can change (Robbins & Judge, 2012).

Emotional-focused coping aims to control emotional responses in stressful situations. An emotional-focused approach is used when they believe can do small things to change their stressful conditions (Robbins & Judge, 2012). Robbins & Timothy (2016) describe several types of coping strategies in problem-focused and emotional-focused coping, namely planful problem solving (problem-focused), confrontative (problem-focused), seeking social support (problem/ emotion-focused), distance (emotion-focused), escape/ avoidance (emotion-focused), positive response (emotion-focused), self-control (emotion-focused), and acceptance responsibility (emotion-focused).

## METHOD

### Research design

This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study type aims to learn about the unique phenomena that focuses of research. A qualitative approach adopted by using research procedures that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from sources who are met and their background is observed thoroughly (Moleong, 2017). The reason for using a qualitative approach is based on the focus of research to obtain appropriate results (Poerwandari, 2017), namely knowing how to describe stress and coping strategies used by single mothers after the death of their husbands and to be responsible for caring for their children. The data mining technique of this research is filling out questionnaire sheets and interviews conducted on the subject and the significant other.

### Participants

Participants in this study were obtained through informants who know about the condition of the participants as a single mother due to the death of a partner. The characteristics of the participants in this study included: the women whose husbands had died and had not remarried; have biological children (one or more) of their husbands, bear the burden of life and education for their children who are currently attending school or college; and have a personal business or a permanent or temporary job which is the main income.

**Table 1. Profile of Research Participants**

Aspect	Participants 1	Participants 2	Participants 3
Age	33 years	35 years old	28 th
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam
Current status	death divorce	death divorce	death divorce
Profession	Lecturer	teacher	employees
last education	S2	S 1	S1
The age at which the husband died	28 th	30 th	26 years old
The impact experienced	Stress, financial weakness,	financial meltdown h	Stress and stigma Stress

### Data analysis

This study uses thematic analysis techniques. Thematic analysis is the process of coding qualitative information through an explicit code in the form of a list of themes; a complex model containing themes, indicators, and qualifications linked in causality; or something in between (Boyatzis, 2010). Thematic analysis function to find patterns of various - kinds of information that was collected (Poerwandari, 2017).

## RESULT

This study produces informational data on the description of post-death stress couples and various forms of coping strategies used by working single mothers. In general, this study found differences in the description of stress and coping strategies in the three participants. The description of stress shown by the three participants in this study includes stress symptoms, sources of stress, and responses to stress.

### Stress symptoms

To determine the symptoms of stress experienced by each participant after the death of their husband, researchers used a questionnaire of stress symptom diagram adapted from Robbins and Timothy (2016).

Table 2. Participant Indicator Stress Symptoms Questionnaire Results

Indicator	Participants 1	Participants 2	Participants 3
Physical Symptoms	-	Blood pressure increases	Blood pressure increases
Psychological Symptoms	Often put off work	Often put off work	Often delay work Irritability
Behavioral Symptoms	Diet changes; Sleep disturbance	Diet changes; Sleep disturbance	Diet changes; Sleep disturbance

These results show that the three participants have the same psychological symptoms, namely often delaying work. The first participant showed the least stress symptoms, while the third participant showed the most stress symptoms.

### Source of Stress

Generally, sources of stress can be divided into three parts, namely conflicts, changes in life, and daily quarrels (Atkinson, 2011). Based on these three indicators, the researcher focuses on the part of life change, because the focus of this study is the post-death stress coping strategy of a partner, so life change is the most related indicator. The life change referred to this study is widowhood, after previously having a partner and then separated due to death. The impact of the death of a partner can be a source of stress experienced by the three participants, namely on economic, social, and psychological factors. The death of a partner make the mother experiences a depreciation of important resources in carrying out parenting functions, namely the loss of psychological and economic support from the partner, changes in status, roles, and identity crises, and emotional disturbances, loneliness, feeling helpless, hopeless, and loss of feeling, and confidence. This study found that participant 1 did not feel serious financial pressure because she had sufficient income and received insurance for her child's schooling. Meanwhile, participant 2 had to work side by side as well as being a teacher, and selling food. After the death of her husband, participant 3 had to work as a factory employee to provide for her family's needs, where previously she was only a housewife.

In terms of social, participant 1 and the participants 2 is not depressed in the association of social environment and family. Meanwhile, participant 3 felt the social pressure after the death of the partner through bullying from her husband's family on herself and her two children.

Participant 1 stated that he only felt stress after the death of his husband related to changes in his life . Meanwhile, in participant 2, he admitted to experiencing anxiety about changes in his life and meeting the needs of his children. Participant 3 stated that the psychological pressure was anxiety about changes in his life, about meeting the family's financial needs and the existence of bullying from his husband's family.

### Response to stress

The statements of the three participants, it is known that each participant has a diverse response in facing the stress. According to Sarafino (2012), individual responses to the stress they face include; anxiety; anger and aggression; apathy and depression; and cognitive impairment. Anxiety is felt by participant 1 after the death of her husband in the form of trouble adjusting the vicissitudes of life. In participant 2, the anxiety experienced after the death of her husband was in the form of financial difficulties and life changes. Meanwhile, the anxiety response experienced by participant 3 was in the form of financial difficulties to meet the necessities of life and the cost of educating her two children and there was anxiety about the stigma of a widow from the community.

The response to anger and aggression in participants 1 and 2, it was found that she never showed a physical or verbal response to anger or aggression after the death of her husband. Prefers to pray and surrender to God rather than vent his anger on other people or objects around him. While the response of anger and aggression pf participant 3 after the death of her husband is a form of behavior grumpy or angry for no apparent reason when under stress.

Furthermore, on the indicators of apathy and depression, it is known that the three participants admitted that they never showed a withdrawal response from their social environment when experiencing stress after the death of their husband.

Meanwhile, on the indicators of cognitive impairment, participant 1 often found difficult to concentrate while working after the death of her husband. In participant 2, it is known that her concentration is often distracted, but this is not a stress response due to her husband's death, but only boredom in her daily work. Meanwhile, participant 3 felt that his focus was often diverted when he remembered his child's school fees, but this did not affect his performance.

### **Coping stress**

In this study, all three participants to apply any kind of coping strategies that stated by Robbins & Timothy (2016) to cope stress after the death of her husband. According to Robbins & Timothy (2016), coping has two main functions, namely Problem-focused Coping and Emotional-focused Coping. Types of coping strategies that focus on problem solving, among others; planful problem solving; confrontative; and seeking social support for instrumental reason. While the kinds of coping strategies that focus on controlling emotional responses include; distance; escape/ avoidance; positive reappraisal; self-control; acceptance responsibility; and seeking social support for emotional reason.

Participant 1 did not seem to have done a lot of problem-focused coping strategies, namely only by deciding to work (planful problem solving), consulting with family (seeking social support for instrumental reason), facing and continuing to live (confrontative), and making decisions in life with how to counsel with family (planful problem solving). The rest, participant 1 focused more on emotional approaches in dealing with stress after the death of her husband. Participant 1 also often sought social support from parents and siblings with the aim of getting empathy and calming feelings (seeking social support for emotional reasons).

The coping distance strategy, participant 1 tends to behave as if he is not facing sadness and sees the good side of what happens. Participants 1 also apply coping strategies escape/ avoidance in the form of fantasizing about how the situation should it happens and tried to make themselves comfortable and on holiday with the children-his son. The positive coping strategy applied by participant 1 was in the form of a belief that he would be fine and that the adversity he experienced would make him closer to God and stronger in facing life.

The implementation of self-control coping strategies for participant 1 was just living life in a flow, attending recitation to keep himself from being influenced by other negative things and consulting with those closest to him about decision making and problem solving.

Participant 1 also implemented a coping acceptance responsibility strategy in the form of accepting his own condition, realizing that he had shortcomings as a parent and taking action to change the situation.

participant 2, the coping planful problem solving strategy that was understanding the existing situation and trying to stay in its condition, making plans and implementing it, trying to change the situation for the better, and finding a way out by looking for a side job. Furthermore, the confrontative coping strategies applied by participant 2 were to keep facing and living an ongoing life.

The coping seeking strategy for social support was more focused by participant 2, the instrumental reason, which is seeking information from other people, especially families about the situation and asking for suggestions for the future. Emotional reason, the participant 2 told his feelings to his family and closest relatives and receiving sympathy and understanding from them.

The form of implementing the coping distance strategy for participant 2 is trying to accept reality, seeing the good side of the disaster, and trying to accept destiny. Then, the coping escape/ avoidance strategy that is implemented is to hope that the situation will change for the better and trying to make herself comfortable by hanging out with family often. Participants 2 also apply positive reappraisal coping strategies in the form of the belief that he would be good condition.

The self-control coping strategies implemented by participant 2 included; trying to keep feelings of sadness in oneself, preventing other people from knowing how sad they are for the misfortunes of their life, pouring out their sorrows by praying to God and keeping their feelings from being affected by other things that can add to stress. Then, the coping acceptance responsibility strategy that is applied is to accept one's own situation and accept responsibility for changing lives for the better for the sake of their children.

Participant 3, the coping planful problem solving strategies that were applied by understanding the conditions that had occurred and trying hard to stay afloat, making plans and implementing, and trying to change the situation for the better. Furthermore, the confrontative form that was taken by participant 3 was to continue to live and face the existing life.

The coping seeking strategy for social support that was more focused on by participants 3 was emotional reason by telling the feelings she was experiencing to her family and friends. As for the instrumental reason, participant 3 looks for information from others about the situation at hand, as well as tells the problem and asks experienced people, especially advice on finding a job.

The coping distance strategy applied by participant 3 was to try to accept the current condition, see the good side of what happened, and try to accept fate.

The coping escape/ avoidance strategy adopted by participant 3 is to hope that conditions will change for the better and trying to make a comfortable by walking with her child and hanging out with her friends. Participant 3 also implemented a positive coping strategy by believing that he would be fine, as well as making the calamity he experienced as a form of getting closer to God.

The application of self-control to participant 3, among others; keep other people from knowing how sad the bad things are, keeping your feelings from being affected by other things that can add to your stress. Then, the coping acceptance responsibility strategy adopted by participant 3 was in the form of accepting their own conditions, and accepting conditions that made them responsible for changing conditions for the better for their children.

## DISCUSSION

Single mother stress in this study is the stress that occurs after a single mother experiences the death of her husband. This study focuses on showing type of stress that occurs after the death of a working single mother. In this study it was found that single mothers experienced symptoms of psychological stress and behavior, but participant 1 did not experience physical symptoms. This proves that stress symptoms do not always cause physical symptoms in individuals. The stress has various effects on single mothers. Mother cannot feel the impact of death in the form of a change in identity, namely the status of a widow. The responses to post-mortal partner stress that appear in single mothers are anxiety, anger and aggression, as well as decreased cognitive function, but do not generate responses in the form of helplessness and depression. This finding is not in accordance with the theory put forward by Sarafino (2012) where individuals will cause psychological reactions in the form of withdrawing and feeling helpless in facing uncontrolled events.

This study also found differences in the appreciation of emotion towards death stressors among single mothers. Participants 2 and 3 have emotions that tend to be negative towards the death of their partner and perceive the stressor as a very sad event. Meanwhile, participant 1 has a positive emotional appreciation for the death of a partner and only considers it a minor stressor so that it can quickly rise from adversity. These findings are related to resilience, namely the human ability to face, overcome, and become strong due to the difficulties they experience (Wiwin Hendriani, 2018). This is in accordance with Aprilia (2013) where if the resilience in a person increases, he will be able to overcome any problems, be able to increase self-potential, optimistic, emerge courage and emotional maturity. In this study also found the complexity of post-death stressors of single mother partners. Single mothers don't just focus on adversity. The existence of bullying from the husband's family related to inheritance, as well as the pressure from the children's needs is a form of double stress for single mothers. This results in increased blood pressure, difficulty concentrating, and anger for no reason.

The single mothers who have complex stressors and experience them negatively are more likely to report bad experiences and tend to rely on emotional coping. While single mothers who have little stressors and live it as a positive partner upon death as the destiny of God tends to do coping that focuses on life in the future. A single mother in this study did all types of coping that were stated by Robbins & Timothy (2016) to deal with stress after the death of her husband. Robbins & Timothy (2016) describe three kinds of coping strategies in problem-focused coping, namely; planful problem solving, confrontative, and seeking social support for instrumental reason. The problem experienced by a single mother is mental stress due to the death of her husband. This is in line with Robbins & Timothy (2016) that stated a condition of presses physically and psychologically due to demands in oneself and the environment can cause stress and will stimulate individuals to react. In addition, it was noted that each single mother participant asked others for advice. It can be understood that the environment in which individuals are in, especially the immediate environment such as family, is very decisive in providing support to deal with the pressures experienced by individuals (Bhatia, 2016).

The problem-focused coping for single mothers in this study also applied the emotional focused coping approach described by Robbins & Timothy (2016) in six coping strategies, namely; distance, escape/avoidance, positive response, self-control, acceptance responsibility, and seeking social support for emotional reason. This research found that initially single mothers could not accept that the death of her husband was destiny. This is related to the background of single mother participants who experience complete dependence on their partners. From the data obtained through interviews, there are differences in coping strategies that stand out from each part of a single mother. Participants 2 and 3 tended to be more dominant in coping with an emotional approach (emotional-focused coping). This is because this coping strategy is more emotionally oriented, which is an attempt to relieve or manage emotional stress that arises when individuals interact with the environment (Bakhtiar & Asriani, 2015). Meanwhile, participant 1 tends to do coping that focuses on problem solving (problem-focused coping).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, there are three dimensions of post-death stress picture of couples in single mothers who work namely symptoms of stress, sources of stress, and response to stress. From a different picture of stress. The three participants tried every coping strategy available and maintained the coping that made them most comfortable. Participant 1 tends to seek social support in the form of information or advice and sympathy from the family environment and draw closer to God. Then, participant 2 tends to prioritize good self-control for their stress coping strategies. Meanwhile, participant 3 tends to focus on accepting responsibility as a strong mental foundation in dealing with daily problems. The weakness of this study just analyze a single mother caused Post-Mortal Spouse, so the further research can combine the single mother caused Post-Mortal Spouse and divorce to compare them in coping the stress.

## REFERENCES

1. Aprilia, W. (2013). Resiliensi dan Dukungan Sosial pada Orang Tua Tunggal (Studi Kasus pada Ibu Tunggal di Samarinda). *eJournal Psikologi*, I(3), 268-279.
2. Atkinson, R. (2011). Pengantar Psikologi. Jakarta: Erlangga.
3. Bakhtiar, M. I., & Asriani. (2015). Efektivitas Strategi Problem Fokused Coping dan Emotion Focused Coping dalam Meningkatkan Pengelolaan Stres Siswa di SMA Negeri 1 Barru. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan, Psikologi, Bimbingan dan Konseling*, V(2), 69-82.
4. Belsky, J. (2013). *The Adult Experience*. USA: West Publishing Company.
5. Bhatia, Yogeeta & Sri Latha S. 2016. Impact of Family Support on Job Involvement in Women Professionals in India, *Journal of Business Management & Social Sciences Research* 5 (147-154).
6. Budiana & Amalia. 2015. *The Single Moms*. Jakarta: Lentera hati
7. Boyatzis, R. (2010). *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. California: SAGE Publication.
8. Fatimah, S., & Nurdin. (2015). Strategi pemenuhan kebutuhan hidup single parent. *Jurnal Equilibrium*, III(1), 38-46.
9. Moleong, L. (2017). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
10. Naufaliasari, A., & Andriani, F. (2013). Resiliensi pada wanita dewasa awal pasca kematian pasangan. *Jurnal Psikologi Industri dan Organisasi*, II(2), 264-269.

11. Negeri, B. (2013). Subjective well being pada ibu yang memiliki anak tuna rungu. *Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Universitas Surabaya*, II(2), 2-16.
12. Papalia, D., Olds, S., & Feldman, R. (2013). *Human Development edisi 10 Perkembangan Manusia Buku 2*. Jakarta: Salemba Humanika.
13. Pitasari, A., & Cahyono, R. (2014). Coping pada ibu yang berperan sebagai orang tua tunggal pasca kematian suami. *Jurnal Psikologi Pendidikan dan Perkembangan*, III(1), 37-41.
14. Poerwandari, E. (2017). *Pendekatan Kualitatif untuk Penelitian Perilaku Manusia*. Jakarta: LPSP3 Fakultas Psikologi Universitas Indonesia.
15. Qaimi, A. (2012). *Single Parent: Peran Ganda Ibu dalam Mendidik Anak*. (M. Bafaqih, Trans.) Bogor: Penerbit Cahaya.
16. Robbins, S., & Coulter, M. (2010). *Manajemen (10th ed.)*. (H. Slamet, Trans.) Jakarta: PT Indeks.
17. Robbins, S., & Judge, T. (2015). *Perilaku Organisasi (12th ed.)*. (D. Angelica, R. Cahyani, & A. Rosyid, Trans.) Jakarta: Salemba Empat.
18. Robbins & Timothy. (2016). *Perilaku Organisasi*. Jakarta Salemba Empat.
19. Sarafino, E. (2012). *Health Psychology*. Singapore: John Willey & Sons. Inc.
20. Sugiyono. (2012). *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D*. Bandung: Alfabeta
21. Wiwin Hendriani. (2018). *Resiliensi Psikologis*. Jawa Tengah: Kencana