

# Bereavement and sexuality: shifting identities, desires, and sexual meaning after loss

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## INTRODUCTION

A life partner's early death inflicts the deprivation of physical contact, emotional intimacy, and the fulfillment of sexual desire.

Sexuality forms a central component of identity and sexual self-understanding develops intensely in response to life transitions (de Boer, 2023).

This study thus explores the experience of sexual partner loss and sexuality of post-loss young widows.

## METHOD



MIXED-  
METHOD



EXISTENTIAL  
PHENOMENOLOGY

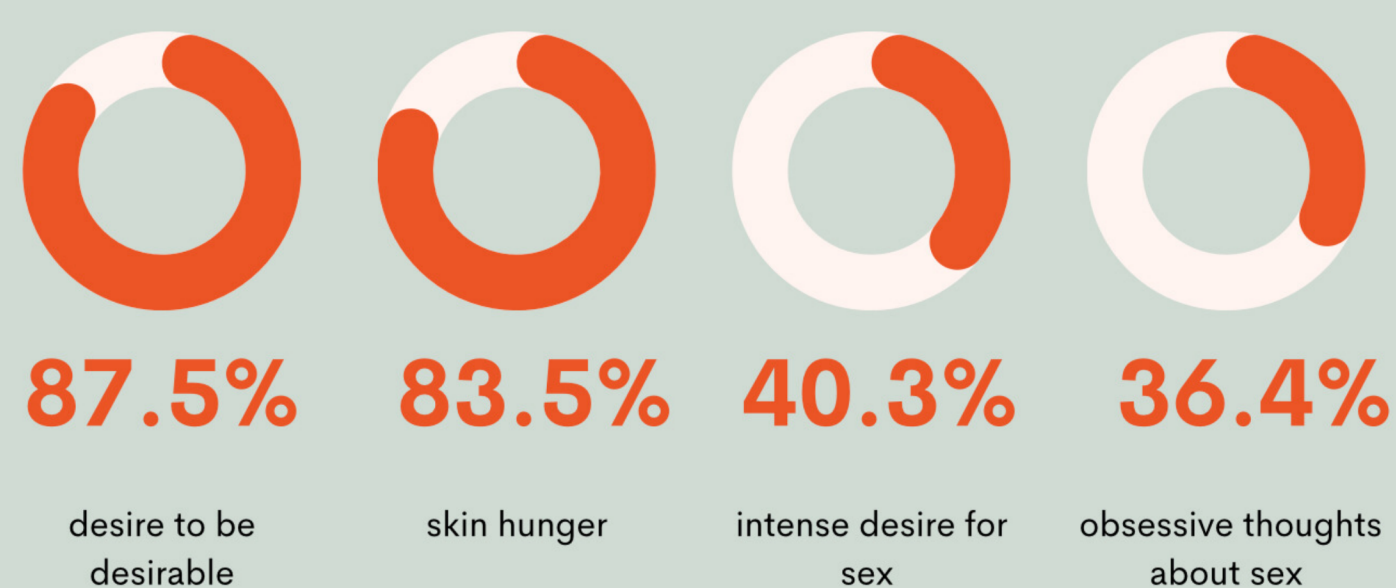


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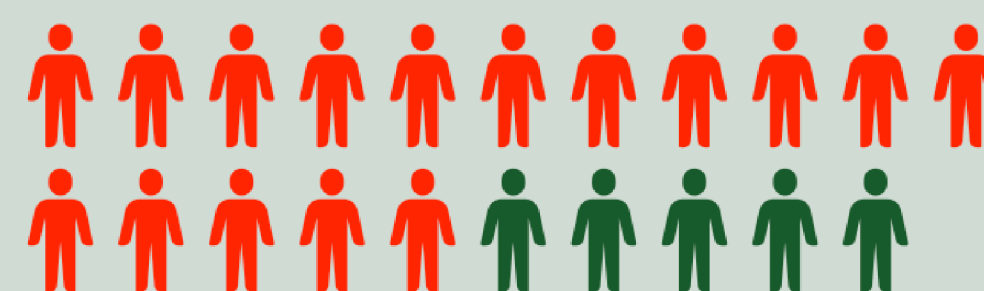


THEMATIC  
ANALYSIS

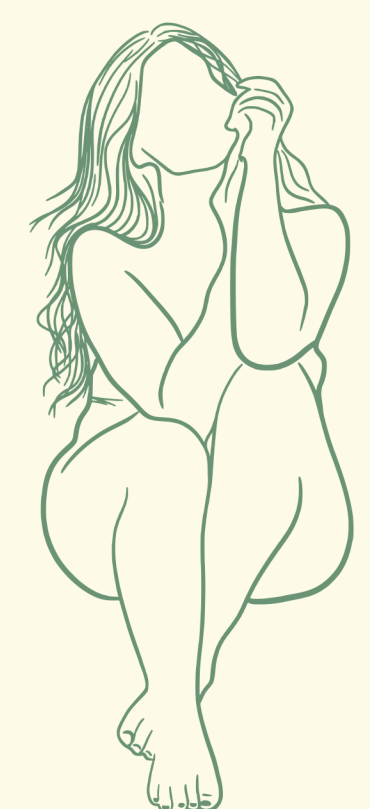
## Widows' Fire N = 176



## QUALITATIVE SAMPLE



16/21 participants  
endorsed widows' fire



### Theme #1

Young widows described that, even if they initially had no desire for sex, they recognized the **profound loss of intimacy and comfort** that their sexual relationship symbolized and experienced deep physical loneliness.

### Theme # 2

Regardless of the quality of their previous relationship or levels of sexual desire, most young widows reported the occurrence of **intense desire for sex**, commonly referred to as widows' fire, within the first year after their partner's death. **Widows' fire** is an unbidden and distressing experience involving **obsessive thoughts about sex**, yearning for physical and sexual contact with another human being, and the **longing to feel desirable**.

### Theme #3

Young widows reported that widows' fire and the ensuing feelings of **confusion, grief, shame, guilt, and isolation** exacerbated their **struggle** to understand and **make sense** of their post-loss identities as sexual beings.

## Quotes

**Theme 1:** It's so tough ... He knew everything about me, about how to turn me on, about vice versa. ...Just knows you, your body, what you need and can read your nonverbal cues as to what you want or you know. It seems so tough because **it's scary to think, to start over**. Yeah, for a long time, I didn't even think about sex or anything. There were other things to tend to [P13].

**Theme 2:** It was like my sex drive was on overdrive. And it wasn't that I desired any one particular person or anything . . . I think the best way to describe it would be, like, someone looking for their next fix . . .Nothing I did [could] satisfy it. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. It is literally the weirdest and worst feeling in the world . . . you feel like **your body is betraying you** [P21].

**Theme 3:** am I supposed to want this with someone else? And **is this normal?** And is this natural? And if I act on this, what does that do to my commitment to my husband? [P18]

## Conclusion

Participants associated widows' fire with their attempts to comprehend their post-loss identities. They believed it was their bodies' way of seeking relief from the trauma of bereavement, a means to reconnect with the sensation of being alive, and a search for the emotional connection they had lost.

Young widows commonly reported ambivalence and distress as they navigated their grief, post-loss sexual desires, and loneliness while facing societal pressures and the disenfranchised loss of their sexual lives.

Widows also reported needs for comfort, connection, and intimacy in tandem with a longing for their partners. There is a need for future research, psychoeducation, and support regarding sexual bereavement for widows, as the concept of widows' fire is generally unknown, and the needs and experiences of young widows facing sexual loss are often disenfranchised, misunderstood, and unspoken.