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Strength-centered group counseling program for individuals in the process of loss and grief: A pilot study

Kayıp ve yas sürecindeki bireylere yönelik güçlendirme odaklı grupla psikolojik danışma programı: Pilot çalışma

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Abstract

Grief is a process that encompasses all of the emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral responses an individual exhibits in response to the loss of a person, object, or situation. This study aimed to test the effectiveness of the pilot application of a strength-centered group counseling program developed for individuals who are in the grieving process. Individuals aged 18-40 who had experienced a loss within the last 18 months, were not undergoing ongoing individual psychological support were included in the group process. The pilot study was conducted according to a single-group experimental design with pre-test and post-test measurements. The program was implemented online over a total of 10 weeks, with one 90-minute session per week, on an experiment group of 7 individuals. Data collection instruments included the Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory, the Grief Cognitions Questionnaire, and the Character Strengths Inventory. The pre-test and post-test scores of individuals in the grief process were compared using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, a non-parametric test. As a result, it was concluded that there was an increase in the levels of meaning restructuring about grief among group members and a decrease in negative thoughts in their grief cognition levels. Significant increases were observed in several character strengths (hope, gratitude, zest, and resilience).

Keywords: *Loss and grief, character strengths, group counseling*

Öz

Yas; bireyin kaybettiği kişi, nesne veya durum karşısında gösterdiği duygusal, bilişsel, fiziksel ve davranışsal tepkileri içeren bir süreç olarak ele alınmaktadır. Bu araştırmada, yas sürecinde olan bireylere yönelik geliştirilmiş güçlendirme odaklı grupla psikolojik danışma programının pilot uygulamasının etkililiğini test etmek amaçlanmıştır. Son 18 ay içerisinde kayıp yaşamış, devam eden bireysel psikolojik destek süreci olmayan, 18-40 yaş aralığındaki kişiler grup sürecine dahil edilmiştir. Pilot uygulama çalışması ön test-son test ölçümlü tek gruplu deneysel desene göre yürütülmüştür. Program, haftada bir gün 90 dakika olmak üzere toplam 10 hafta süreyle çevrimiçi olarak 7 kişilik deney grubu üzerinde uygulanmıştır. Veri toplama araçları olarak kayıp ve anlamı yeniden yapılandırma envanteri, yas bilişleri ölçeği ve karakter güçleri ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Yas sürecindeki bireylerin ön test ve son test puanları non-parametrik testlerden Wilcoxon İşaretli Sıralar testi ile karşılaştırılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, grup üyelerinin yas ve anlamlı yeniden yapılandırma düzeylerinde artış olduğu, yas biliş düzeylerinde olumsuz düşüncelerde düşüş olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır. Birkaç karakter gücünde (Umut, şükran, yaşam coşkusu ve öz denetim) önemli artışlar gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kayıp ve yas, karakter güçleri, grupla psikolojik danışma*

Introduction

The experience of loss and grief is a significantly challenging situation that can lead to profound sorrow and distress in an individual's life. In order to enable the individual to continue the rest of their life in a normal and healthy way, it is imperative that they go through the grieving process. The concept of grief was first addressed by Freud. In his article "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud defined grief as a reaction to the loss of a loved one or of certain values that are important to the person, such as one's country (Freud, 1917). Neimeyer (2002) posits that loss is not confined to death or a tangible separation. The concept of loss also encompasses intangible circumstances in an individual's life, such as the dissolution of a relationship, a lifestyle change, the abandonment of a dream, or a shift in self-understanding. Individuals who experience loss subsequently undergo the mourning process, which is comprised of various emotional stages.

The examination of the impact of loss and the grieving process on mental health is a topic of significant importance. First and foremost, this situation constitutes a primary risk factor for various psychological disorders, primarily depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety. Moreover, loss is an inevitable aspect of the human experience, with the adverse consequences of loss potentially being irreversible (Kendler et al., 2003). It is hypothesized that this intervention program, which was developed for individuals in the grieving process, will assist them in developing a healthier meaning construction process by strengthening their coping skills. A review of the extant literature reveals a paucity of studies that adopt a strength-centered approach and the process of reconstructing meaning. The present study is significant in that it addresses this gap in the literature and provides practitioners with a program proposal.

A review of studies on grief reveals that prior research has predominantly centered on the symptoms and consequences of grief. In contrast, recent studies have shifted their focus to helping individuals adapt in a healthy manner to this process. These studies emphasize individuals' personal strengths and the enhancement of resilience through a process of reframing grief. At this juncture, Neimeyer's "meaning reconstruction" approach emerges as a seminal concept in the literature on grief. This model essentially defines the basis of the grieving process as questioning and rebuilding the meaning attributed to the loss (Neimeyer, 2006).

The meaning reconstruction approach posits that the mourning process entails the individual's endeavor to reconfigure the meanings of their life, relationships, and self in the aftermath of loss. The grieving process is not merely an emotional response; it is also a disruption in the world of meaning concerning the individual's life, relationships, and sense of identity (Neimeyer, 2001). The grief program utilized in this study is grounded in Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Model. In this model, the process of reconstructing meaning in relation to a loss involves addressing the individual's attachment relationship with the deceased, any unfinished business, and the back story of the relationship. The impact of the loss on the survivors' lives and identity are underscored as the most challenging aspects of the process. A range of narrative procedures are employed, including letter writing, verbal retelling of the loss narrative, and exploration of sources of meaning (Barboza et al., 2022; Neimeyer, 2019).

The reconstruction of meaning in life in response to a loss encompasses the process of rebuilding oneself and one's identity. While this process is often accompanied by significant emotional distress, it can also precipitate a number of positive developments. This phenomenon has been termed "post-traumatic growth" by Tedeschi & Calhoun (2008). It is particularly prevalent among individuals who exhibit a tendency to adapt to loss. Individuals who undergo such growth are often perceived to have altered their self-perceptions, becoming more resilient, independent, and self-confident. This process enables them to adopt new roles and develop resilience in the face of subsequent losses. Changes in their social relationships are also frequently reported, often accompanied by spiritual and existential growth (Gillies & Neimeyer,

2006). Grief therapy has adopted resilience as the primary goal for therapeutic interventions, rather than recovery. Resilience-focused interventions are designed to enhance individual and relational sustainability in the face of future adversities by leveraging existing strengths and reusing existing resources (Walsh, 2016). Research has demonstrated that emphasizing individuals' strengths during the grief process enhances emotional resilience, thereby facilitating a more constructive interpretation of the grief experience (Conway, 2011; Davies, 2001; Miller, 2015). Awareness of one's strong character traits fosters conditions conducive to psychological and social development, which in turn enables the individual to overcome difficulties by employing their strengths (Blanchard et al., 2021; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At this juncture, the positive effects of integrating strength-centered counseling with the meaning reconstruction approach on individuals undergoing the grieving process are noteworthy.

Strength-centered therapy is an approach that integrates character strengths and virtues from positive psychology with the social constructivist perspective. This model, which is grounded in character strengths and virtues related to psychotherapy and the social constructivist approach, is known as strength-centered therapy (Wong, 2006). This therapy framework has been influenced by various approaches throughout the history of psychology. Character strengths and the positive psychology developed by Seligman to demonstrate the positive effects of addressing individuals' strengths and good qualities on human development form the backbone of strength-centered therapy (Seligman, 2002). In strength-centered counseling approaches, it is understood that fostering positive emotions by emphasizing the individual's positive and strong characteristics is essential, in contrast to the conventional approach that places greater emphasis on problems and weaknesses. The fundamental unifying principle of these approaches is that individuals possess inherent strengths and the capacity for growth and change.

The field of positive psychology emerged in the aftermath of World War II, at a time when the primary focus was on the rehabilitation of troubled individuals. This period also saw a neglect of efforts to enhance the well-being of the general population. The objective of positive psychology is not solely to accentuate individuals' positive and strong characteristics. It also aims to assist individuals in coping with and overcoming their challenges (Seligman, 2002). In this context, the concept of character strengths has emerged as a pivotal area of study within the field of positive psychology.

Numerous studies in the extant literature posit that character strengths can exert a protective and restorative effect on individuals' mental health. For instance, it has been demonstrated that character strengths such as hope, gratitude, zest, and love are positively associated with individuals' well-being levels and are negatively associated with depression, anxiety, and worry levels. Research has revealed a positive and significant correlation between self-control strength and individuals' capacity to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Park et al., 2004; Seligman et al., 2005). The character strengths of perseverance, hope, and bravery have been found to be quite effective in the management of negative emotions experienced by individuals in the aftermath of traumatic life events (Follette et al., 2006). Furthermore, research has identified a mediating role for character strengths in the levels of post-traumatic growth in grieving individuals (Couto et al., 2021). Another study found that individuals' character strengths are quite beneficial in the grief counseling process (Nicholson, 2018). In this study, a pilot application was conducted in a strength-centered psychological counseling program. Based on the literature review, five character strengths deemed to be most closely related to grief were identified: hope, gratitude, zest, perseverance, and self-regulation. These character strengths were the focal point of the intervention sessions.

The feeling of irreversibility brought on by loss frequently engenders a sense of helplessness, potentially resulting in the erosion of personal

strength, hope, and positive resources. Consequently, individuals experiencing a depressive and unhappy period may become incapable of recognizing their strengths and become preoccupied with their problems. In some cases, individuals may decline to seek psychological assistance, which can further complicate the situation. In the event that the grieving process deviates from the standard course, it is strongly recommended that the individual seek support. Grief counseling is a form of support that aims to assist individuals in coping with the challenging experiences that ensue after a loss by encouraging them to reflect on their memories, thoughts, feelings, preferences, and values related to the loss, to accept the existing reality, and to adapt to life without the person they have lost (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Participation in group counseling enables individuals in the grieving process to interact with others who have experienced similar situations, gain awareness that grief is a universal rather than an individual process, and share their experiences. This phenomenon assists individuals in recognizing that they are not isolated in their experiences and that they can offer mutual support within a a safe and non-judgmental environment. Research has demonstrated that being in a safe and non-judgmental environment with others experiencing similar emotions can facilitate healing (Wolfelt, 2004). The group counseling environment fosters a setting conducive to the provision of social support among members. Consequently, it is postulated that bringing together individuals who have experienced loss can facilitate their coping process and cultivate a sense of solidarity and shared understanding.

The provision of counseling services can be facilitated in both in-person and online modalities. Group counseling sessions are typically conducted on a weekly basis at a predetermined location and time. However, for individuals with limited resources due to health issues or geographical conditions, in-person psychological support may not be feasible. The primary benefit of online counseling is that it greatly increases accessibility. Online counseling presents a viable option for individuals unable to engage in face-to-face counseling, as well as for those grappling with social phobia and hesitant to engage in traditional counseling modalities (Barnett, 2005). In light of these advantages, the group counseling sessions implemented in this study were conducted online.

In accordance with the aforementioned explanations, the efficacy of the 10-session strength-centered group counseling program, which was developed for individuals aged 18-40 who have experienced loss and are in the grieving process, was assessed in a pilot study. The results of the study were evaluated within the framework of the existing literature.

Methodology

The present study was designed according to a single-group experimental design, incorporating two measurements: a pre-test and a post-test. Experimental studies are research models that are utilized to elucidate the causal relationship between variables (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018).

Study Group

The study group comprised seven volunteers ranging in age from 18 to 40 who had experienced the loss of a loved one to death within the past 18 months. The study commenced with a total of nine participants; however, two participants withdrew prior to the completion of the process.

The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 40, have lost a close relative due to death within the last 18 months, be a volunteer, not take psychiatric medication, and not receive individual psychological support.

Exclusion criteria encompassed being outside the specified age range, taking psychiatric medication, receiving individual or group psychological support, and having been bereaved for more than 18 months.

The use or non-use of medication was determined based on the participants' own statements.

This study does not aim to provide clinical diagnosis. No diagnostic screening has been performed.

Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of the sample group.

Tablo 1. ***Demographic Characteristics of Group Members***

Mean age	**30.14**	***N***
Level of education	Undergraduate degree	6
	Graduate student	1
Person lost	Parents	2
	Siblings	2
	Spouse	1
	Other	2
Reason for loss	Heart attack	2
	Cancer	1
	Suicide	2
	Earthquake	2
Time after loss	3-6 months	1
	7-12 months	1
	13-18 months	5
Getting psychological support after loss	Yes	5
	No	2

The group sessions were conducted online via the Zoom platform, with sessions occurring once a week for a duration of 90 minutes, amounting to a total of 10 weeks. This research was conducted as a pilot study of a scientific program developed as part of a doctoral thesis. The sessions were recorded in case supervision support was needed. Prior to the initiation of the program, individual preliminary interviews were conducted with all members to elucidate the confidentiality of the sessions, the rationale behind the recording of sessions, that the recordings would only be stored on the group leader's encrypted computer, and that they would all be destroyed after the research was completed. During the session, it was specified during both the preliminary individual interviews and the structuring phase of the process in the first group session that all members' cameras must be on and that no one other than the group leader should record audio, images, or video. Informed consent forms were obtained via email from all members who accepted these conditions after the preliminary interviews, and the group process was then initiated.

Data Collection

Character Strengths Inventory (VIA-IS-P): The scale is a self-report instrument comprising a total of 96 items, with each character strength being measured by four items, encompassing 24 distinct character strengths. The scale is a 5-point Likert scale and was adapted to Turkish culture by Demirci et al. (2021). The present study employed a 20-item set measuring five-character strengths (*hope, gratitude, zest, perseverance, and self-regulation*) as the aim was to develop these character strengths. For the sample group in this study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the reliability analysis of the Character Strengths Inventory and found to be .87.

Grief Cognitions Questionnaire (GCQ): The scale was developed by Boelen and Lensvelt-Mulders (2005) and adapted to Turkish culture by Cesur and Durak-Batıgün (2018). The scale consists of 30 items and 6 subscales, which are *negative cognitions about future after loss, negative/threatening interpretation of emotions and reactions to loss, negative cognitions about self after loss, negative cognitions about world after loss, cherish grief,* and *negative cognitions about others after loss.* The scale is a 6-point Likert instrument. A high score on the scale indicates a high level of negative cognitions related to grief. For the sample group in this study, Cronbach's alpha value was calculated for the reliability analysis of the Grief Cognitions Scale and found to be .89.

Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory (GMRI): The scale was developed by Gillies, Neimeyer, and Milman (2015). The adaptation to Turkish culture was carried out by Keser and Işıklı (2018). The scale is a 5-point Likert instrument with a total of 27 items and 4 subscales, which are *Continuing Bonds, Personal Growth, Sense of Peace,* and *Emptiness and Meaninglessness.* For the sample group in this study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the reliability analysis of the Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory and found to be .85.

Data Collection Process

First, ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Social and Human Sciences Research Unit at Yıldız Technical University (document dated November 20, 2023, meeting number 2023.11, and report number 20231102420). To that end, a poster and application form were created to announce the program. The program was disseminated through various digital channels, including social media, email, and WhatsApp. A total of 16 individuals submitted applications for the program. Preliminary interviews were conducted with 12 subjects. During the preliminary interviews, the participants were provided with fundamental information regarding the group counseling process, the established rules, and the content of the program. 3 members who exhibited reluctance to share their personal experiences of grief and to listen to the narratives of others were excluded from the process. Following the conduction of the preliminary interviews, a total of 9 individuals were selected to participate in the group. However, given the departure of two members during the course of the study, the analysis was based on the findings of the seven members who completed the group counseling process. Two 2 participants (one aged 21 who had experienced the loss of her father, the other aged 25 who had experienced the loss of her sister) stated that they wished to receive individual psychological support and withdrew from the group process.

The program was administered online, with sessions held once a week for a duration of 90 minutes over a period of 10 weeks. The group process was led by the group leader, who completed the Basic Program on Working with Loss and Grief, Grief Journals (online), and Advanced Program on Loss and Grief Therapy (face-to-face) trainings delivered by Prof. Robert A. Neimeyer, the general director of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition in the United States, and Dr. Carolyn NG. Furthermore, studies were conducted with different groups experiencing the grieving process as part of the advanced group counseling course during doctoral training.

The general objectives of the program include the following: To help members gain awareness about the emotions and life changes experienced due to loss, the grieving process, and secondary losses. To support the meaning-making of life after loss.

Tablo 2. Summary of the Strength-Centered Group Counseling Program

	Session Title	Session Objective
1	Introduction/Program Overview	Structuring the process and informing members about group rules Informing members about the program's content and purpose
2	Understanding the Grieving Process/The Challenging Effects of Grief	Discussing the stages and symptoms of the grieving process and types of grief Members gaining awareness of the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical effects of their own grief stories
3	Secondary Losses/Coping Methods	Gaining awareness of what secondary losses are and their effects following a loss Recognizing how problems have been dealt with up to now and which strengths have played a role in this process
4	Character Strengths	Ensuring members are knowledgeable about positive psychology and character strengths Supporting members in discovering their own character strengths
5	Hope as a Character Strength	Gaining knowledge about the character strength of hope Gaining awareness of the positive effects of hope in the grieving process
6	Self-Regulation and Perseverance	Learning about self-regulation and perseverance as character strengths Gaining awareness about the effects of self-regulation and perseverance on the grieving process Identifying any self-regulation issues experienced after loss
7	Gratitude and Zest	Learning about gratitude and zest as character strengths Gaining awareness of the effects of gratitude and zest on the grieving process
8	Steps for Change: Building Positive Connections	Gaining awareness about unfinished business in the relationship with the person lost Positively rebuilding the bond with the person who has been lost
9	Restoration of Life/Believe and Build	Gaining awareness of resources that make you feel strong and secure (*Activity: Map of strength and security in the past-present-future dimensions)*
10	Conclusion	Evaluating the changes experienced within the scope of character strengths and their impact on the grieving process Evaluating the effects of participating in the group process on the ability to make sense of grief Ending the group

To instill the feeling that one is not alone through the healing power of the group environment. To create space for discussing the grieving process in a safe and non-judgmental environment. To support members in recognizing their strengths. To help members learn about character
strengths such as hope, gratitude, self-regulation, perseverance, and zest, and to support them in integrating these into their lives to cope with the grieving process. Table 2 summarizes the sessions of the group counseling program.

Data Analysis

Prior to the analysis of the data, a thorough examination was conducted to identify and address any potential missing or inaccurate data. The data was then subjected to analysis using the SPSS program. Initially, a normality test was conducted, which revealed that the data did not demonstrate a normal distribution. Given the absence of a normal distribution in the data, non-parametric tests were employed. The data was analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a statistical method that is employed when the participants' difference scores do not demonstrate a normal distribution.
This alternative is chosen over the dependent groups t-test when such conditions are met. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is employed when the data does not demonstrate a normal distribution, either in the context of two matched groups or in the case of the same subjects at two distinct times (Büyüköztürk, 2011). Furthermore, the descriptive statistical values of the data are reported.

Results

This section presents the descriptive statistics of the participants and the pre-test and post-test measurement results from the pilot study.

A subsequent examination of the descriptive statistical values of the scales in Table 3 reveals an increase in the post-test mean scores of the Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory and the Character Strengths Inventory. A decrease is observed in the post-test mean score of the Grief Cognitions Questionnaire.

Tablo 4.Descriptive Statistical Values

Measurements	n	Min	Max	Mean	Ss
Pre-test-GMRI	7	88.00	101.00	94.28	4.75
Post-test-GMRI	7	80.00	105.00	98.28	8.84
Pre-test- VIA-IS-P	7	31.00	54.00	46.14	7.64
Post-test- VIA-IS-P	7	39.00	71.00	60.71	10.71
Pre-test-GCQ	7	93.00	125.00	101.00	10.95
Post-test-GCQ	7	75.00	115.00	85.00	13.67

GMRI: *Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory* ***VIA-IS-P:*** *Character Strengths Inventory (Hope, self-regulation, perseverance, gratitude, zest)* ***GCQ:*** *Grief Cognitions Questionnaire*

As illustrated in Table 4, significant differences are evident among the sub-dimensions of hope, self-regulation, gratitude, and zest on the Character Strengths Inventory (p = 0.017, p = .017, p = .026, p = 0.026, respectively).

Tablo 3. Character Strengths Inventory Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

Sub-dimensions		n	Rank Mean	*Rank Sum*	*z*	*p*
Post-test-Hope Pre-test-Hope	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.288[b]	.017*
	Positive Rank	7	4.00	28.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				
Post-test-Self-Regulation Pre-test-Self-Regulation	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.388[b]	.017*
	Positive Rank	7	4.00	28.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				
Post-test- Gratitude Pre-test - Gratitude	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.232[b]	.026*
	Positive Rank	6	3.50	21.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	7				
Post-test-Perseverance Pre-test-Perseverance	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-1.826[b]	.068
	Positive Rank	4	2.50	10.00		
	Ties	3				
	Total	7				
Post-test-Zest Pre-test – Zest	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.226[b]	.026*
	Positive Rank	6	3.50	21.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	7				
Post-test-Total Pre-test –Total	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.371[b]	.018*
	Positive Rank	7	4.00	28.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				

(*p <.05)

Tablo 5.Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

Sub-dimensions		n	Rank Mean	Rank Sum	z	p
Post-test- Personal Growth Pre-test - Personal Growth	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.214[b]	.027*
	Positive Rank	6	3.50	21.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	7				
Post-test – Continuing Bonds Pre-test - Continuing Bonds	Negative Rank	4	5.50	22.00	-1.364[c]	.171
	Positive Rank	3	2.00	6.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				
Post-test – Emptiness and Meaninglessness Pre-test - Emptiness and Meaninglessness	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.414[b]	.016*
	Positive Rank	7	4.00	28.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				
Post-test – Sense of Peace Pre-test- Sense of Peace	Negative Rank	0	.00	.00	-2.018[b]	.036*
	Positive Rank	6	3.30	20.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	7				
Post-test – Total Pre-test Total	Negative Rank	1	1.00	1.00	-2.201	.028*
	Positive Rank	6	4.50	27.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				

(*p <.05)

Yet, no significant differences were observed in the perseverance sub-dimension (p > .05). A subsequent analysis of the total scores on the Character Strengths Inventory revealed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results (p = .018). The effect sizes (Cohen's d) calculated for the character strengths inventory are as follows: Hope (r = .86), self-regulation (r = .90), gratitude (r = .84), zest (r = .84), perseverance (r = .69), total (r = .89).

As illustrated in Table 5, significant differences are seen in the sub-dimensions of personal growth, emptiness and meaninglessness, and sense of peace in the Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory (p = .027, p = .016, p = .036, respectively). The Continuing Bonds sub-dimension exhibited no statistically significant differences (p > .05). A subsequent analysis of the total scores on the Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory revealed a significant discrepancy between the pre-test and post-test results (p = .028). The effect size (Cohen's d) values calculated for the Grief and Meaning Reconstruction inventory are as follows: Growth subscale (r = .84), Continuing Bonds subscale (r = .51), Emptiness and Meaninglessness subscale (r = .91), Sense of peace (r = .36), overall scale (r = .83).

As shown in Table 6, there are significant differences between the pre-test and post-test scores for certain sub-dimensions of the Grief Cognitions Questionnaire, namely negative/threatening interpretation of emotions and reactions to loss, negative cognitions about world after loss, cherish grief, and negative cognitions about others after loss (respectively; p = .043, p = .026, p = .040, p = .039). No significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test scores for the sub-dimensions of negative cognitions about future after loss and negative cognitions about self after loss (p > .05). However, a significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test scores for the total scale score (p = .018). The effect sizes (Cohen's d) calculated for the Grief Cognitions Questionnaire are as follows: The subscale of negative cognitions about the future after loss (r = .72), the subscale of negative/threatening interpretation of emotions and reactions to loss (r = .76), the negative cognitions about the self after loss subscale (r = .26), the negative cognitions about world after loss subscale (d = .84), the cherish grief subscale (r = .77), the negative cognitions about others after loss subscale (r = .78), and the overall scale (r = .89).

Tablo 6.Grief Cognitions Questionnaire Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

Sub-dimensions		n	Rank Mean	Rank Sum	z	p
Post-test - Negative Cognitions About Future After Loss Pre-test - Negative Cognitions About Future After Loss	Negative Rank	5	3.90	19.50	-1.897[b]	.058
	Positive Rank	1	1.50	1.50		
	Ties	1				
	Total					
Post-test - Negative/Threatening Interpretation of Emotions and Reactions to Loss Pre-test - Negative/Threatening Interpretation of Emotions and Reactions to Loss	Negative Rank	5	3.00	15.00	-2.023[b]	.043*
	Positive Rank	0	.00	.00		
	Ties	2				
	Total	7				
Post-test - Negative Cognitions about Self After Loss Pre-test - Negative Cognitions about Self After Loss	Negative Rank	1	5.00	5.00	-.677[c]	.498
	Positive Rank	4	2.50	10.00		
	Ties	2				
	Total	7				
Post-test - Negative Cognitions about World After Loss Pre-test - Negative Cognitions about World After Loss	Negative Rank	6	3.50	21.00	-2.226[b]	.026*
	Positive Rank	0	.00	.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	7				
Post-test – Cherish Grief Pre-test – Cherish Grief	Negative Rank	6	4.33	26.00	-2.050[b]	.040*
	Positive Rank	1	2.00	2.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				
Post-test - Negative Cognitions about Others After Loss Pre-test - Negative Cognitions about Others After Loss	Negative Rank	5	3.00	15.00	-2.060[b]	.039*
	Positive Rank	0	.00	.00		
	Ties	2				
	Total	7				
Post-test – Total Pre-test – Total	Negative Rank	7	4.00	28.00	-2.371[b]	.018*
	Positive Rank	0	.00	.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	7				

(*p <.05)

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study conducted a pilot application of a strength-centered group counseling program for individuals in the grieving process. The pilot application was assessed employing a single-group pre-test-posttest experimental design, with a sample of seven participants ranging in age from 18 to 40 who had experienced the loss of a loved one within the past 18 months. It examined the impact of a 10-week group counseling program on the levels of grief and meaning restructuring, character strengths (hope, gratitude, zest, perseverance, and self-regulation), and grief cognitions of individuals in the grieving process. A notable constraint of this study is its implementation on a limited sample size and the utilization of a single experimental group, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. As this was a pilot study, the feasibility of the developed program was tested. Consequently, the results obtained may limit the generalizability of the study.

The results of the program were measured using quantitative data and reported accordingly. Furthermore, during the program's concluding session, when members were asked to evaluate their individual participation, the vast majority indicated that being part of the group process and interacting with others experiencing similar challenges proved to be highly beneficial.

The findings of the study revealed difference between the pre-test and post-test total scores of the experimental group, as measured by the participants' grief and meaning reconstruction inventory results. In consideration of the aforementioned results, it can be posited that the group counseling program was effective in enhancing the participants' levels of grief and meaning reconstruction. The grieving process and meaning restructuring model posits three fundamental tenets: making sense of experiences after loss, finding benefit, and identity change. These processes have been demonstrated to facilitate individuals' psychological adjustment to grief, mitigate prolonged grief symptoms, and assist them in integrating the loss process into their lives (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

When this search for meaning is suppressed or hindered, the grieving process is prolonged and psychological well-being is negatively affected. Consequently, within the framework of the counseling process, it becomes imperative to provide support to foster the development of new meanings for the individual grappling with loss, rather than reducing the symptoms that come with grief (Neimeyer et al., 2014). As highlighted in these studies, it is crucial for individuals in the grieving process to comprehend what the pain they experience transforms into within them and how it affects their self-perception and future lives. According to the dual-process model developed by Stroebe and Schut (2010), individuals oscillate between acceptance of the loss and coping with life changes during the grieving process. For healthy coping, it is essential to maintain a harmonious equilibrium between these two processes. In a recent study examining the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and grief reactions during the grieving process, it was found that meaning in life mediates this relationship (Akdoğan & Akoğlu, 2024). It has been demonstrated that the ability to reframe the grieving process has been associated with enhanced emotional regulation, which, in turn, has been linked to an improvement in well-being. The findings of this study also indicate that the process of reframing the grieving process may contribute to coping with grief.

The findings of the study revealed difference between the pre-test and post-test total scores of the experimental group, as evaluated by the participants' several character strengths inventory results. A substantial difference was identified in the comparative analysis of pre-test and post-test scores for the character strengths of hope, self-regulation, gratitude, and zest. Yet, no significant result was found between the pre-test and post-test scores for the character strength of perseverance. Based on this finding, it can be posited that the implementation of the counseling program on the subject group was effective in fostering the participants' character strengths.

Research indicates that character strengths, which vary among individuals and are considered universal, have a positive effect on individuals' well-being and psychological resilience (Wagner et al., 2021; Höfer et al., 2020; Yeo et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2010). It is widely accepted that hope plays a significant role in fostering resilience in the face of challenging life circumstances. Furthermore, studies indicate that it plays an important role in traumatic experiences, depression, mental disorders, and the grieving process as a healing and preventive factor against recurrence (Griggs, 2017; Cha & Yi, 2013; Holland and Lewis, 2000). Research has demonstrated that hope functions as a buffer against depression, complicated grief, and suicide, and that individuals with high levels of hope cope more effectively with the grieving process (De Alvarenga et al., 2021; Chow, 2010; Snyder, 2000). A study was conducted with a sample group of 3,710 individuals who had lost a loved one to death within the last six months in order to examine the relationship between seven-character strengths (curiosity, hope, zest, love, perseverance, spirituality, and gratitude) and the grieving process. It was observed that individuals with high levels of the seven-character strengths experienced a decrease in depression levels over time and were more resilient to functional impairments (Blanchard et al., 2021).

A multitude of studies have demonstrated that character strengths play a pivotal role in individuals' responses to challenging life events and their levels of well-being. The findings of this study are corroborated by related research. A recent study examined the efficacy of a 12-session online group counseling program for individuals diagnosed with prolonged grief disorder. The study found that the sense of security provided by participating in the program from their own homes was highly effective in helping clients express their deepest emotions. Furthermore, it was observed that the group counseling program, which involved meaning making for the loss process, reduced prolonged grief disorder symptoms over time (Batista et al., 2025).

A review of intervention studies targeting the enhancement of gratitude reveals a concomitant decline in depressive symptoms and an increase in overall happiness levels (Mongrain & Anselmo-

Matthews, 2012; Seligman et al., 2005). Hope, self-regulation, kindness, and social intelligence character strengths have been found to serve a protective function against trauma and stress (Park & Peterson, 2006). In a study conducted by Kabakçı et al. (2019) with individuals aged 14-19, the zest character strength was found to be a protective factor in young people's stress coping processes. The study also found that a positive relationship exists between zest and life satisfaction, and those with high zest character strength are more emotionally energetic, exhibit adaptive coping strategies, and participate more actively in life.

Contrary to prevailing expectations regarding perseverance as a character strength, no significant results were found in the comparison of scores before and after the application. As a character strength, perseverance is related to long-term effort and endurance capacity toward goals. In other words, this trait can be characterized as one that is predominantly influenced by cognitive and behavioral factors. During the grieving process, the predominance of emotional processes and the individual's more fragile state may not have yielded a meaningful result on the level of perseverance. Despite a paucity of direct studies on the relationship between perseverance and grief, extant research has identified a positive correlation with the ability to cope with challenging life events and the subsequent development of post-traumatic growth (Doğan, 2018; Tekyaman, 2024). According to Anestis and Selby's (2014) findings, perseverance has been identified as a protective factor against self-harm behaviors, including suicide.

An examination into the results related to the level of grief cognition, another variable in the study, revealed a significant difference in the comparison of pre-test and post-test scores. Prior to the intervention, the participants exhibited elevated levels of negative grief-related cognitions; however, following the 10-week program, these levels underwent a decline. Boelen et al. (2006) developed a model suggesting that negative general beliefs and negative interpretations of grief reactions play a critical role in the emergence of complex grief and in grief reactions becoming persistent and pronounced. A multitude of studies have identified a strong correlation between negative grief cognitions and complex grief symptoms (Boelen & Klugkist, 2011; Nagy & Szamosközi, 2014). A thorough examination of the extant literature reveals the efficacy of negative cognitions in exacerbating grief symptoms during the grieving process and the importance of addressing this issue in grief counseling.

In this study, the pre-test and post-test scores of the group counseling program for individuals undergoing the grieving process were compared. In conclusion, it can be said that the programme is applicable to individuals experiencing grief. It is thought that the programme will have a positive impact on the grief levels of young people in a similar sample group.

The findings indicate that participants in the group process experienced significant changes in their grief and meaning reconstruction, character strengths, and grief cognition levels. The efficacy of hope, gratitude, zest, and self-regulation character strengths in the process of restructuring grief and meaning was found to be statistically significant, while no significant results were found for perseverance character strength. A notable finding of the study was the evaluation of the program's efficacy through its implementation in an online setting. Online counseling constitutes a significant alternative, particularly for individuals who experience social anxiety and are unable to receive face-to-face counseling due to limited opportunities. Moreover, extant research has demonstrated that engaging in group processes online from a familiar environment where individuals feel secure (e.g., their own homes) enhances well-being and substantially reduces depression and grief levels (Uneno, 2024; Zuelke, 2021).

In addition to the aforementioned alternatives, there are several risk factors to consider, including the challenges associated with establishing a therapeutic relationship (i.e., the limited body language and emotional cues available in face-to-face communication), ethical principles, confidentiality, and

technological limitations. (Baker & Ray, 2011; Mallen & Vogel, 2005). Ensuring confidentiality in a digital environment can pose significant challenges in comparison to its application in face-to-face counseling. Yüksel Şahin's (2021) study revealed that counselors exhibit a preference for face-to-face counseling over online counseling, primarily due to concerns regarding confidentiality. In the study by Erus and Zeren (2020) that examined the levels of therapeutic collaboration between clients and counselors in online and face-to-face counseling processes, a positive relationship was found between the levels of therapeutic collaboration between online and face-to-face clients and counselors and it was concluded that online counseling is as effective as face-to-face counseling in ensuring therapeutic collaboration.

The results of this study are consistent with those of other studies. Social support has been identified as a critical resource during the grief period (Kreicbergs, 2007; Benkel & Molander, 2009; Sarper & Rodrigues, 2023). Numerous studies have examined the healing power of such support in individuals. A review study examining the effectiveness of grief camps on individuals in the grieving process analyzed 31 different studies and found that these camps provided significant improvements in individuals' psychosocial functioning, depression levels, and self-perceptions (Chi et al., 2025). In an experimental and control group study in which a 16-session cognitive-behavioral-based group counseling process was conducted with bereaved individuals, it was found that participating in the group process significantly reduced individuals' depression symptoms (Bardideh et al., 2025).

A notable limitation of the study is the absence of a control group. The program implemented in this study was limited to individuals between the ages of 18 and 40. Moreover, the findings of the study are constrained by the data obtained from the measurement instruments employed in the study. It has also been acknowledged that the risk of Type I error may increase due to multiple comparisons.

The present study included individuals aged 18-40 who had experienced loss within the last 18 months. The study could be replicated with a different sample by narrowing the loss period and age range. The individuals lost were diverse in terms of their relationship to the group members (e.g., mother, father, sibling, etc.). This procedure could be replicated with homogeneous groups, such as those who have experienced the loss of only a parent or spouse. The present study employs a single-group experimental design. The program could be retested by including a control group. The incorporation of diverse character strengths into the program could serve to enhance its overall efficacy. The integration of various activities aimed at addressing grief and facilitating meaning reconstruction within the therapeutic framework can also be considered.

Declarations

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***Ethical Approval*:** Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Yıldız Technical University Social and Humanities Research Ethics Committee with the report number 20231102420, dated November 20, 2023.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study after they were informed about the purpose of the program, confidentiality principles, and the voluntary nature of participation.

Data Availability: The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and participant privacy but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the study design, data collection, analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. This study is a pilot application conducted as part of the first author's doctoral dissertation.

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