

External Locus of Control as a Protective Factor for Coping with the Death of a Spouse: A Longitudinal Approach Using Latent Growth Modeling

Jule Specht, Boris Egloff, Stefan S. Schmuckle

The death of a spouse is the most stressful life event that can occur, and it often causes a large drop in life satisfaction. Because there is much variability in coping abilities across the widowed, the authors investigated whether belief in external locus of control explains part of this variance. Although belief in external control has been associated mostly with undesirable outcomes, it might be a protective factor when facing an uncontrollable event. To examine this issue, data from the German Socio Economic Panel Study (SOEP) were used, wherein belief in external control was surveyed in the years 1994 to 1996. Individuals who lost their spouse in the years after this measurement comprised the sample ($N = 414$). Life satisfaction was measured every year and served as the dependent variable for a period of 4 years before and after the loss. A latent growth model was used to investigate the course of satisfaction. Belief in external control showed the well-known negative effect on the general level of satisfaction, but also led to a considerably smaller decline in satisfaction in reaction to the spouse's death. Individuals with high belief in external control reported even more satisfaction in the year of the loss than those who scored low on this dimension. Hence, belief in external control acts as a protective factor for coping with the death of a spouse.