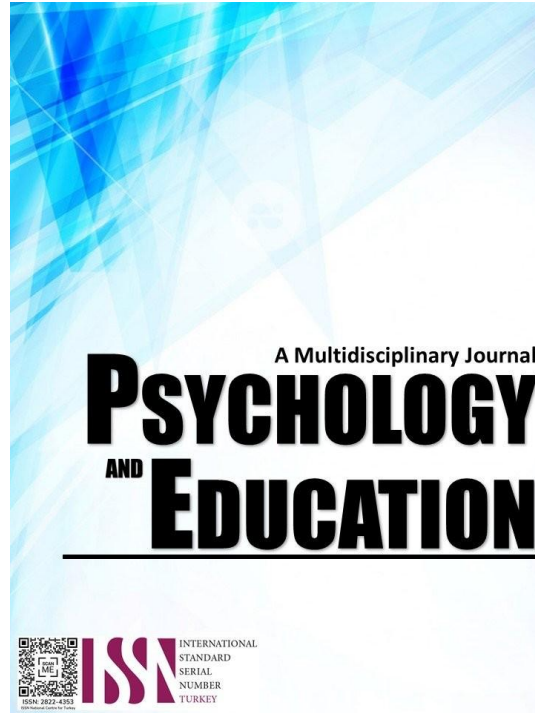


AFTER THE STORM: ADOLESCENTS' RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL CONNECTION FOLLOWING FAMILY MEMBER LOSS



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After The Storm: Adolescents' Resilience and Social Connection Following Family Member Loss

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Abstract

This study examines the resilience and social connection of adolescents following family loss due to calamities, whether natural or man-made disasters. The goal of the study was to examine the resilience and social connection of adolescents following family loss in the aftermath of calamities. Specifically, this aimed to explore the following: (a) to determine the nature of calamity that led to family loss; (b) to understand the participants' relationship with the family member; (c) to determine the coping strategies utilized in response to family loss, and (d) to explore how social connections influence the recovery process. The study utilized a phenomenological research design. The participants went through a series of pre-established questions. From the findings, six different themes were established: Nature's wrath and human error, Close moments and distant words, The inter-section strength of joy and grief, Support lifts perseverance, Seeking solace in destruction yet strengthened, and Renewed connection with stronger ties. The study suggests that social connection plays a crucial role in adolescents' resiliency in coping after experiencing family loss due to calamities. The Guidance and Counseling Unit should be encouraged to organize growth sessions for teenagers who lose family members due to disasters.

Keywords: *social connection, resilience, natural disaster, man-made disaster, adolescent*

Introduction

One of the most direct and tragic impacts of any disaster is the loss of life. Whether caused by natural or man-made disasters, the loss of life contributes to long-term societal impacts. According to UNICEF Philippines, in 2021, young people in the Philippines are at the highest risk of the impacts of disasters, which affect their health, education, protection, and overall well-being. Every year, approximately 175 million children worldwide are expected to be affected by natural disasters. However, certain people possess the ability to manage the circumstances, recover from the incident, and develop greater social connections and resilience. Some adolescents might develop issues in their coping mechanisms, which can affect their resilience as well. Resilience can manifest in different forms depending on the context and the challenges faced.

Therefore, it appears likely that the sudden and unexpected nature of deaths from external causes may affect the child and their immediate support system more than deaths from natural causes. With regard to this, the sudden death of a family member affects the child's way of life, how they connect with others, and how their recovery influences them.

Furthermore, the definition of resilience has evolved through the years. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2020, it is "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors". Resilience allows people to recover again or bounce back to maintain psychological health when faced with challenging situations, such as death in the family. With this, they become more capable of handling life's difficulties, reducing the risk of long-term emotional distress and improving their chances of success and well-being in adulthood. This resiliency refers to how people handle certain situations in their lives, which helps them recover and continue their daily activities with fewer difficulties.

In relation to this, the social connections of adolescents can change after a stressful or traumatic event happens in their lives. It can cause disruptions in the way the adolescent perceives, interacts with, and trusts others, which can have an impact on the dynamics and quality of their social interactions. And after losing a family member, there is definitely an impact on their social connections; the experience of grief can change the way adolescents maintain their relationships with others. The social connections of adolescents in this regard refer to how they interact with their family, peers, or the community after experiencing a traumatic or sudden event in their lives. This event affects or influences their connection, interaction, or bond within their community, particularly after losing a family member in a disaster.

PAGASA explains why recent typhoons tend to only hit Northern Luzon. A specialist from the state weather bureau attributed the recent string of tropical cyclones striking Northern Luzon to the ridge of a high-pressure area located north of the country (INQUIRER, 2024). And since Isabela is located in the Cagayan Valley region and often in the direct path of typhoons entering the Philippines, the consequences after typhoons can be devastating for families already living with limited resources, destroyed homes, crops, and infrastructure, putting residents at significant risk, and sometimes resulting in the loss of someone's life. These calamities may result in personal and societal disruptions for adolescents, and the loss of parents or siblings during such events can worsen their situation. Understanding how families are affected after natural disasters is vital for developing effective interventions to support those affected, especially in the province of Isabela, which is frequently affected by calamities.

Furthermore, this supports Goal 3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which is Good Health and Well-being, ensuring healthy lives

and promoting well-being for all at all times. The targets of SDG 3 focus on various aspects of healthy life and a healthy lifestyle. Thus, this study will hold significance for professionals in developing interventions aimed at enhancing resilience and rebuilding social networks for those affected. This will also highlight the importance of sensitivity for grieving and recovering for any individual, not just adolescents, and promote their emotional well-being and recovery. By understanding the connection between family loss, resilience, and social connection in the aftermath of disasters, this research aims to fill a crucial gap in adolescents' recovery. However, there are only a few and limited studies that provide insights; that's why this study will be beneficial in providing a clearer understanding of how family loss in the context of calamity affects resilience and social connection, particularly in children and adolescents.

Research Questions

The primary goal of the study was to investigate the resilience and social connection of adolescents following family loss in the aftermath of natural disasters and man-made calamities. Specifically, it aimed to explore the following:

1. To determine the nature of calamity that led to family loss.
2. To understand the participants' relationship with the family member.
3. To determine the coping strategies utilized in response to family loss.
4. To explore how social connection influences the recovery process.

Methodology

Research Design

To better understand the adolescents' social connections and resilience after experiencing family loss, the researchers employed a phenomenological research design. This approach provides deeper insights into individuals' latent and unseen experiences (Lebni, 2022). It is an approach to understanding the universality of phenomena that examines the perspectives and experiences of individuals.

In this study, this method was selected due to its ability to capture the current state of a phenomenon and provide detailed descriptions of individuals, processes, or situations. Furthermore, the phenomenological research design was employed in this study to explore the participants' thoughts, emotions, and experiences of losing a family member through in-depth interviews, which allowed the participants to share their personal experiences.

Respondents

The five (5) participants on this study are late adolescents, their ages range from 18 to 21, and they are the individuals who have experienced the two-year loss of a family members due to calamity, such as a natural disaster or man-made disaster. The participants are students from one of the College University in the region. Using non-probability sampling, a purposive sampling method is employed to select participants based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experience relevant to the study (Robinson, 2023).

The researchers have established criteria to ensure that the most suitable participants are identified for the study. The occurrence must have occurred two (2) years ago to know how their resiliency influences their social connections. Since this event happened not long ago, it provides more accuracy and reliability to the study's objectives. Also, any of the family members' deaths must be caused by a natural disaster or man-made disaster.

Instrument

Participants were interviewed by the researchers using a semi-structured questionnaire. The researchers employed a series of pre-established questions, totaling six items, which enabled the researchers to conduct an in-depth review of their experiences. Professionals validated the interview guide to ensure that the complexities of the study objectives were accurately recorded, thereby maintaining its trustworthiness.

Procedure

Prior to selecting the participants, the researchers administered a self-made pre-survey that met the necessary criteria. After determining which participants are qualified, the researchers wrote a communication letter requesting permission to visit each college's Dean's office to conduct data gathering through interviews. When the permission was granted, the researchers started compiling information on the study's target participant profile.

Participants received a thorough explanation of the study and an assurance that the privacy of their personal information would be maintained. Additionally, participants were provided with an informed consent form that explained the study's goals and objectives.

In order to protect each participant's privacy, interviews were held in private. To guarantee thorough data collection, the researcher and participants' conversations were recorded during the interviews.

Following the process of gathering data, the researcher transcribed the interview recordings. This transcription acts as the basis for compiling and comprehending the information acquired. To preserve the privacy of participant data, all recordings and interview transcripts were deleted upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to investigate the role of social connection in the resilience-building of adolescents following a family loss due to a natural or man-made disaster. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify patterns, meaning, and themes within a dataset. Researchers may use thematic analysis to identify and evaluate patterns or themes within a dataset, which often leads to new perspectives and understanding (Boyatzis, 1998; Elliot, 2018; Thomas, 2006).

The first step in thematic analysis was familiarization with the data. The researchers analyzed the recorded data from the study participants, focusing on their narratives about social connections and resilience following the loss of a family member. Following data familiarization, the researchers proceeded to the initial coding stage. This involved the initial codes by identifying patterns within the data. Subsequently, the initial codes are organized into potential themes and reviewed thoroughly to ensure accuracy and relevance. When the themes were identified, named, and categorized, they were organized to reveal the relationships and connections between them. The final step is to write the thematic analysis report, which includes sections on study questions, methodology, and the identified themes. Furthermore, to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, the analysis undergone during the validation process is presented in the final report.

Results and Discussion

The study demonstrates how social connections impact the resilience of adolescents in coping with the loss of a family member. Major questions were included in the study, such as: What is the cause of the incident that led the participant to lose them? Describe the relationship of the participant to the family before the incident happened. What coping strategies helped the participant recover from losing a family member? In what ways did the following help the participant build resilience: family, friends, community, and others? What experiences made a difference during the grieving process, and what changes occurred in the relationship with friends and family after the loss? Were they stronger, weaker, or did any other changes occur?

Table 1. *Summary of the emerging themes on the Adolescents' Resilience and Social Connection on losing family member.*

Themes	Description	Key ideas	Respondent insights
1. Nature's wrath and human error	Explores the two different types of disasters that affected communities and individuals.	Natural disasters, man-made disasters	"Drowned" (Participant2); "Motor accident" (Participant3 & Participant5).
2. Close moments and distant words	It describes situations in which people share space, activities, or even relationships without engaging in genuine conversation or expressing their feelings.	Mutual interest, positive relationship, distant relationship	"...we're close..." (Participant1); "...we aren't that close." (Participant5).
3. The inter-section strength of joy and grief	These are two different coping mechanisms that used on recovering process. When the weight of sorrow no longer drowns, joy arises and allows the beauty of life to coexist with the remnants of loss.	Exploring outside comfort zone, socializing, grieving alone	"...I didn't spend much time at our house anymore..." (Participant2); "...sometimes I hang out with friends, but when I'm alone, that's when I cry..." (Participant3).
4. Socialization	They are driven by two forces that foster self-development and progress. Support and perseverance go hand in hand to make life grow.	Social support, self-reliance, words of encouragement, perseverance	"...In my family, we all help each other to recover... And with my friends, they are always with me, they are the ones who always comfort me..." (Participant2).
5. Silent sorrow			
6. Support lifts, perseverance	In their search for relief, they choose destruction, but their resilience results in an unexpected recovery.	Substance use, self-harm, rebellion, resiliency	"...There were also times when I really rebelled and self-harmed..." (Participant3).
7. Seeking solace in destruction yet strengthened			
8. Renewed connection with stronger ties	Reconciliation has the capacity to rekindle distant connections and turn them into deeper relationships.	Stronger relationship, rebuilding connections	"...the relationship with my family got deeper." (Participant3).

The Nature of the Calamity that Led to Family Loss

Theme 1: Nature's Wrath and Human Error

The results show that the cause of the deaths of the participants' family was from natural and man-made disasters; electrocution, drowning, and vehicular accidents. Natural disasters occur due to natural forces that are hardly controllable, while man-made disasters occur due to the carelessness of humans. Losing a family member is one of the most painful experiences anyone can endure. This may affect the adolescents' social lives and relationships within society.

Sudden losses, such as those arising from natural disasters and vehicular accidents, do not allow those left behind the chance to prepare themselves, either for the loss of the relationship with the deceased or for any other things. This also supported the study of Berg et al. (2016), where the sudden and unexpected nature of external cause deaths may have a stronger impact on the child and its immediate

supportive network than a natural cause death, where there has often been some time for the child and the network to prepare for the consequences of the loss. The suddenness of this event often leaves the family with overwhelming grief, a sense of helplessness, and an unexplainable feeling. To recover from the experience, participants have different ways to cope with the emotional aftermath. Since losing someone you love in an unforeseen circumstance that is beyond their control can leave scars that may never fully heal, it is a pain unlike any other scars. Not only do these tragedies claim lives, but they also often destroy entire families' lives.

Adolescents losing their parents or siblings in a natural or man-made disaster may have different coping strategies depending on the type of disaster it is, since the two types of disaster connect through the grief of the family. This means that the loss of a parent or sibling during adolescence has a profound impact, and how adolescents handle this loss can be influenced by the type of disaster, whether it is man-made or natural. The grieving process is complex and multifaceted, often affecting an adolescent's close social network, which comprises friends, family, and community connections.

Overall, this theme highlighted the nature's wrath, showing how human error can greatly affect someone's life and the vulnerability of human life. The loss of a family member is an emotional scar that cannot heal; the grief of losing loved ones is a reminder of the fragility of life and how long-lasting effects on the adolescent's emotional and physical health.

Relationship of the Participants and the Family Member

Theme 2: Close Moments and Distant Words

This theme emerged through the different codes of the transcribed interviews, which show how their relationship with their loved ones was before the incident happened. Close yet distant, a family has moments that create memories; yet, in some situations, there is an invisible wall, a barrier in terms of communication. A connection that is felt powerfully in shared experiences, but remains unspoken or emotionally distant when it comes to communication is a bond that thrives in presence, in silence, and in gestures, but struggles with vulnerability, openness, and emotional expression.

The results show that the relationship between the participants was somewhat distant, despite sharing common interests and having a mutual understanding; however, some stated that the relationship they had before the accident was a positive one, similar to a sibling bond or parent-child bond. This eventually helped them recover, yet since they had different relationships, they also had different ways of coping. The strength and type of bond with family members can significantly affect how individuals process grief and recover from such losses. And according to Farrukh (2024), connection serves as the bedrock of emotional health and resilience, and highlights that individuals who maintain strong connections with their family members tend to exhibit lower levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Furthermore, having different relationships within the family can have varying emotional responses and coping strategies during the grieving process. The intensity of grief often correlates with the bond within the family; this may cause deeper sorrow or a faster recovery. Families with strong bonds tend to support one another through challenging times, which positively impacts their mental health. Moreover, children raised in connected families are more likely to develop healthy relationships outside the family unit, as they carry the lessons learned about love, support, and communication (Farrukh, 2024). Due to the emotional security provided by strong family bonds, this can influence their social and emotional development in the case of recovering from loss. Those who maintain their openness and closeness within their family can find support and strength in their presence.

However, the strained relationships of the participants are with their siblings; the dissolution of a sibling relationship is a phenomenon known as sibling estrangement. According to NeuroLaunch (2024), sibling estrangement refers to the physical or emotional distance between siblings, often characterized by minimal to no contact, unresolved conflicts, and a communication breakdown. It is a somewhat silent separation within siblings growing up with different causes from their childhood. The data gathered through the participants' interviews revealed that only mutual and shared interests were keeping them together, but they were growing emotionally distant from each other.

Lastly, this theme explores the emotional paradox of the participants, who are physically close to their families, share mutual interests, yet are emotionally distant due to a lack of communication. It highlights how their relationships have created invisible walls despite having unexpressed feelings.

Coping Strategies utilized in Response to Family Loss

Theme 3: The inter-section of Strength Joy and Grief

The results showed how participants have different coping strategies that helped them recover from losing a family. Despite their different coping mechanisms, they are actually living strong lives when light and shadow overlap. Joy offers us moments of peace and beauty in life, but the memory of grief lingers, reminding us to hold tightly to joy when it visits us.

The participants' emotions intersect with how they cope with the loss; some reach acceptance, grieving alone, and are confused, but most of them prefer the company of others and always socialize with them. That's why the theme highlights how joy and grief intersect in terms of a coping mechanism. These emotions will collide, and they might find themselves grappling with an unfamiliarity that can be enlightening and challenging at the same time. Following that, two sub-themes emerged: socialization and silent sorrow, which are

used as coping strategies for dealing with family loss.

Furthermore, the results of the data gathered through their responses showed that the participants were confused and preferred to grieve alone throughout the grieving process. Additionally, all participants are somehow connected to the deceased. This means that having a close and tight relationship with them makes them struggle to cope easily. The closeness that binds them carries emotional weight, which affects their vulnerability. The stronger the emotional bond, the greater the sense of loss to them, which can manifest into having emotional attachment, which, according to Jackson (2022), is a normal part of development; the emotions you receive from emotional attachment are a sense of safety, protection, a sense of belonging, comfort, reliability, and positivity. Additionally, the participants' family plays a significant role in their childhood, which is why their absence created a painful void that's hard to fill again. Moreover, the other participants experienced early acceptance and coped with socialization and interaction with others. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), a study shows that most people can recover from loss on their own through the passage of time, provided they have social support and healthy habits. It may take months or a year to come to terms with a loss. This means that social support plays a crucial role in helping them recover from the death of a family member. Being surrounded by friends or support groups reduces the pain and the feeling of isolation, providing the comfort they need.

Overall, the sudden loss may also influence how they might recover. When adolescents and young adults experience the death of friends, it is often caused by violent and sudden deaths after accidents or suicides. With this, the theme shows that embracing both is the strength. They can still look for the light while sitting there in grief. Instead of being resistant to suffering, those who discover strength in the midst of joy and grief are courageous enough to live life to the fullest as these two experiences mold them. Life does not require them to choose between happiness and sorrow. They are asked to experience both, to find the strength that comes from choosing to go on for themselves and others, rather than from acting as though nothing is wrong.

Adolescents' Social Connection Influences Recovery Process

Theme 4: Support Lifts Perseverance

Also included in the analyzed interview data, the participants stated that with support and their perseverance, they were uplifted and pushed through to rebuild their resilience. Strength is found not just in standing tall, but also in knowing when to rely on others and when to delve deep inside oneself. Their friends and family members help them recover when they fall and step in to help them heal the pain; sometimes support is as simple as a listening ear or a kind word.

The results show that the participants' ways to help themselves build better resiliency are through hearing words of encouragement from their social connections, developing self-reliance, and perseverance. With this, they were able to recover from the loss. The words of encouragement from relatives and friends help them with their mourning process by providing emotional support, building resilience, and promoting healing. This reminds them that through words, they cannot feel alone; a comforting word may help alleviate the pain of loss, and with the addition of support, it allows them to acknowledge and process their emotions without judgment or pressure. Strong social support safeguards against the negative psychological and physiological responses to stress, serving as a buffer of protection that aids in coping (Cacciatore et al., 2021). The study has also explored social support in grief as a salutary factor, serving as a mediator for proactive coping. Therefore, this provides validation for our emotions, reassurance during tough times, and gives strength when we are at our weakest point in life.

Moreover, the participants also shared that they developed perseverance and self-reliance during the recovery process, which helped them become more resilient. This means that having perseverance involves accepting the pain, having the courage to continue without fear, and being resilient at the same time. They also narrated that they developed self-reliance due to their family, which helped them navigate the situation. The determination they have to take steps even when their path is unclear. The way they acknowledge their pain but choose not to be consumed by it, instead, they choose to build and heal the emotional wound they hold while grieving.

Perseverance fosters resilience, enabling individuals to cope with failures and adjust their strategies, aligning with the adoption of a growth mindset—a concept popularized by psychologist Carol Dweck. Those who cultivate a growth mindset believe that their abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. This attitude leads to a greater willingness to take on challenges, embrace feedback, and persevere when outcomes are uncertain (Garon, 2024).

This theme gives insights that there are times when no one sees the battles they fight, and in those moments, it is perseverance that carries them forward. To encourage them to keep trying until they succeed. It is the voice inside that whispers, "Keep going," when everything feels heavy.

Adolescents' Social Connection Influences Recovery Process

Theme 5: Seeking Solace in Destruction Yet strengthened

Participants seek solace in destruction, but apparently, it is their way of being strengthened in rough situations. Given their age, they expected to experience many things; they have this eagerness to seek comfort in different ways. During their grieving process, they have somehow similarities in their experiences based on their narrative interviews.

With the emerging theme from the different initial codes, the results show that most of them are addicted to alcohol and go clubbing.

The other participant also stated that self-harm and rebellion were their way to forget the pain, but this experience also made them become resilient. It is also revealed that they had never done this before; this was started the day after their recovery. Destruction is a raw and violent form, often feared, yet it can also be the birth of resilience and unexpected comfort.

The comfort they seek is not to increase the chaos and pain but to acknowledge the transformation that occurs when everything falls apart. The aftermath of the loss made them stick to the idea that the changes in their life are a relief. Additionally, drinking alcohol as a coping strategy is a common behavior likely reinforced by drinking during those times when the individual actually experienced negative emotions and a subsequent reduction of such emotions following alcohol use. Drinking to cope with negative thoughts and feelings has been consistently found to predict greater alcohol consumption and greater alcohol harm among adults. Self-harm was also the coping strategy of the other participant, which made a difference in the way they grieved to their family. According to the Cleveland Clinic (2023), self-harm is when you injure yourself on purpose. Also known as non-suicidal self-injury disorder, people who self-harm do things to hurt themselves but don't want to cause death. This is a strategy that can allow the participant to express overwhelming emotions. Self-harming is also a way of seeking help without verbally asking for it, and they might struggle to reach out for help to reconnect with reality. Additionally, having rebellious behavior was also part of the participant's seeking solace in destruction. From defiant teenagers to rule-breaking adults, rebellious behavior emerges as a complex tapestry woven from psychological, environmental, and biological threads, leaving a trail of personal and societal consequences in its wake. At its core, it's a deliberate act of resistance against established norms, rules, or authority figures (NeuroLaunch, 2024). Losing a family member can be traumatic for some people, especially for adolescents, which can lead to rebellious behavior as a way to cope with the grief and emotional pain.

Overall, this theme highlighted that the participants sought solace in destruction yet were strengthened, which means that this experience made a lasting difference throughout their recovery process. This captures how they cope with pain, escape the hurtful situation, but this makes them rebuild what has been taken from them.

Adolescents' Social Connection Influences Recovery Process

Theme 6: Renewed Connection with Stronger Ties

Loss has its way of unraveling life's complexities. Relationships often drift away as people change and bonds themselves fade away. But apparently, as the results show from the data gathered through the narrative of all five (5) participants, their relationships they have with their family and friends became stronger because they chose to rebuild the relationships they had before the incident happened.

The participants stated that the connection they have after the death of their family becomes the reason to fix, build, and strengthen the bridge that connects them more than before. Shared loss can bring people together, make them forget differences, and even heal struggling relationships. As families grieve together, they can be intentional about supporting one another, allowing venting, reminiscing, and looking out (Gardon, 2024). Grieving together strengthens family ties and offers hope for mending damaged relationships, and mourning unites people. Additionally, Gardon (2024) also stated that when someone passes away, families often hope to support each other through shared grief, which may strengthen bonds or help heal past conflicts. Grief is a testament to love and can coexist with the emergence of new relationships.

Furthermore, the participants shared that despite the loss, they chose to hold tight, renew, and restore what was once there. They deepen and reshape into something stronger, becoming stronger and healing together. It is their choice to understand each other again, love each other, and transform into a better connection. Moreover, the social connections they have formed have become stronger, especially with their friends; they shared that having them as their support system helped them remain strong and resilient during their difficult times. Support systems also help students alleviate mental distress and increase their ability to cope with stressful situations. A strong social network has a significant impact on your overall health. Those with good friends tend to live longer and generally boast stronger immune systems. In this moment, having them around is essential for their emotional and mental well-being, as it is necessary to keep moving forward.

Overall, this theme of renewed connection and stronger ties played a significant role in the well-being of the participants and in the study on understanding resilience and social connection after the loss of a family member. Lastly, grief may create distance between people; yet, what makes human connection truly powerful is that it has the capacity to renew what is lost. A reconnection not only restores relationships but also strengthens them further, whether it's with a family member or friend.

Conclusions

In conclusion, social connection plays a crucial role in adolescents' resiliency in terms of coping after experiencing family loss due to calamities, whether natural or man-made. Participants' relationships become stronger due to social connections, which help them build resilience. The presence of strong social relationships and community engagement offers them emotional stability during a period of grief and uncertainty. Furthermore, adolescents' coping strategies, such as socializing and interacting with others, have helped them recover quickly and handle life's setbacks. Overall, social connection helps adolescents build resilience despite all circumstances, fostering emotional recovery and strengthening them further.

Based on the conclusion, several recommendations are identified to enhance support for adolescents with similar experiences.

First, the Guidance and Counseling Unit of the Office of Student Affairs and Services is encouraged to conduct growth sessions for adolescents who have experienced the loss of a family member due to calamities. This would serve as an avenue where they can express their grief and emotions without fear of judgment or invalidation. Additionally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct a comparative study with a broader scope of disaster aftermath, including family loss, the types of family loss, and various variables, to determine the impacts on social connectivity and resilience outcomes in adolescents.

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