



# Enhancing Undergraduate Students' Responses to Bereaved Peers: An Innovative Online Intervention

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to conduct a randomized controlled trial to assess the efficacy of CARES, an online intervention developed to educate undergraduate students about how to communicate with friends who experienced the death of someone close to them. College students (N=231) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (1) the CARES intervention, (2) a website containing information about grief and loss, or (3) a control condition. Results indicated that students who participated in the CARES intervention had the greatest knowledge regarding grief and appropriate communication with grieving peers when compared to participants in the website and control conditions. In addition, students receiving the intervention were more confident in their ability to help a grieving peer and had the greatest skill in communicating with a grieving peer. Thus, the CARES intervention has potential for educating undergraduates about effective communication with their grieving peers.

## Introduction

Many college students (22% to 30%) are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or friend (Balk, Walker & Baker, 2010). The college environment provides unique challenges for bereaved students, including being away from home and experiencing academic stressors. Grieving college students may be reluctant to seek mental health services, thus friends may be the most accessible source of support. However, some peer responses may be unintentionally problematic (Bergene, 2013), perhaps due to a lack of knowledge regarding how to respond to grieving friends. Enhancing knowledge and confidence in communicating about grief may promote the initiation and enhanced quality of support behavior, in line with Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977). Thus, the purpose of this study was to create and evaluate an educational online intervention (CARES) to increase knowledge, confidence and skills when responding to bereaved peers. This intervention aimed to educate college students about effective communication with grieving peers, which may improve their ability to function academically, interpersonally and emotionally.

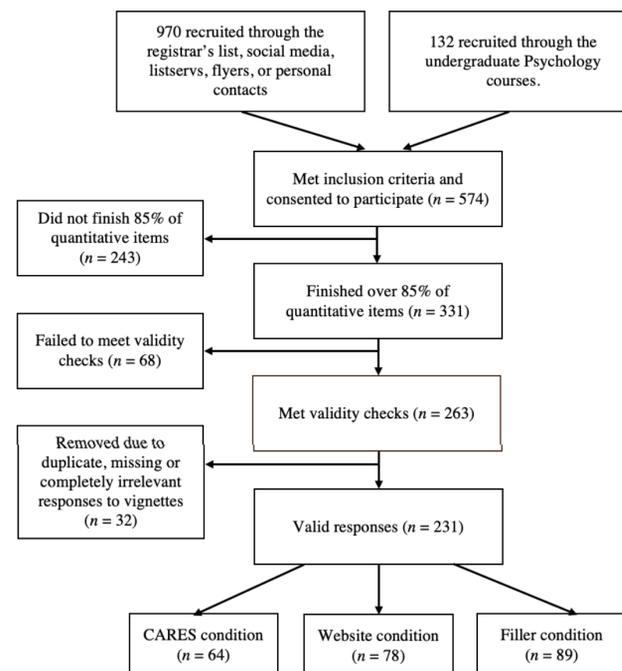
## Method

### Participants

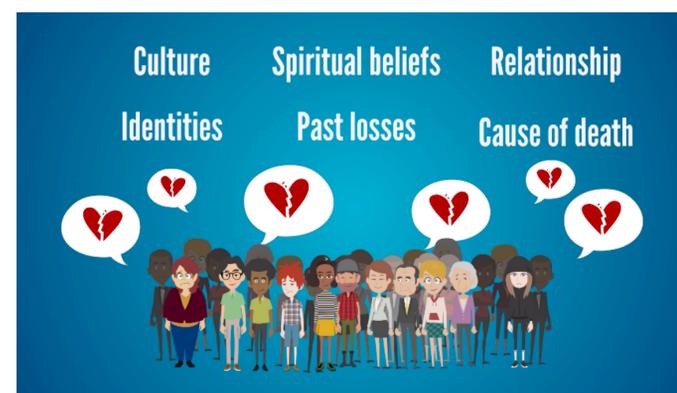
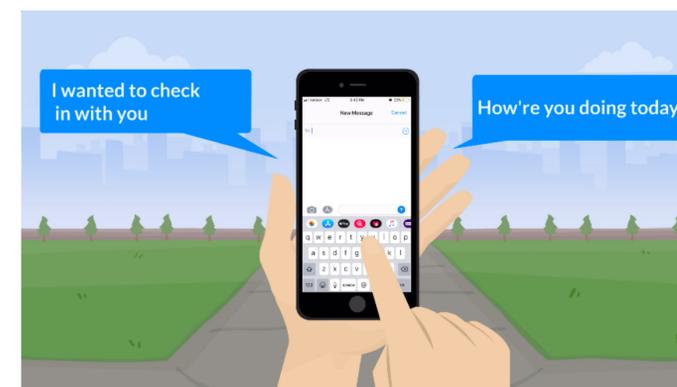
- The participants were 231 undergraduate students at a large mid-eastern university, ranging in age from 18 to 24. Most were female (65.8%) and White (55.8%) with 12.1% Black and 22.9% Asian participants.

### Procedures

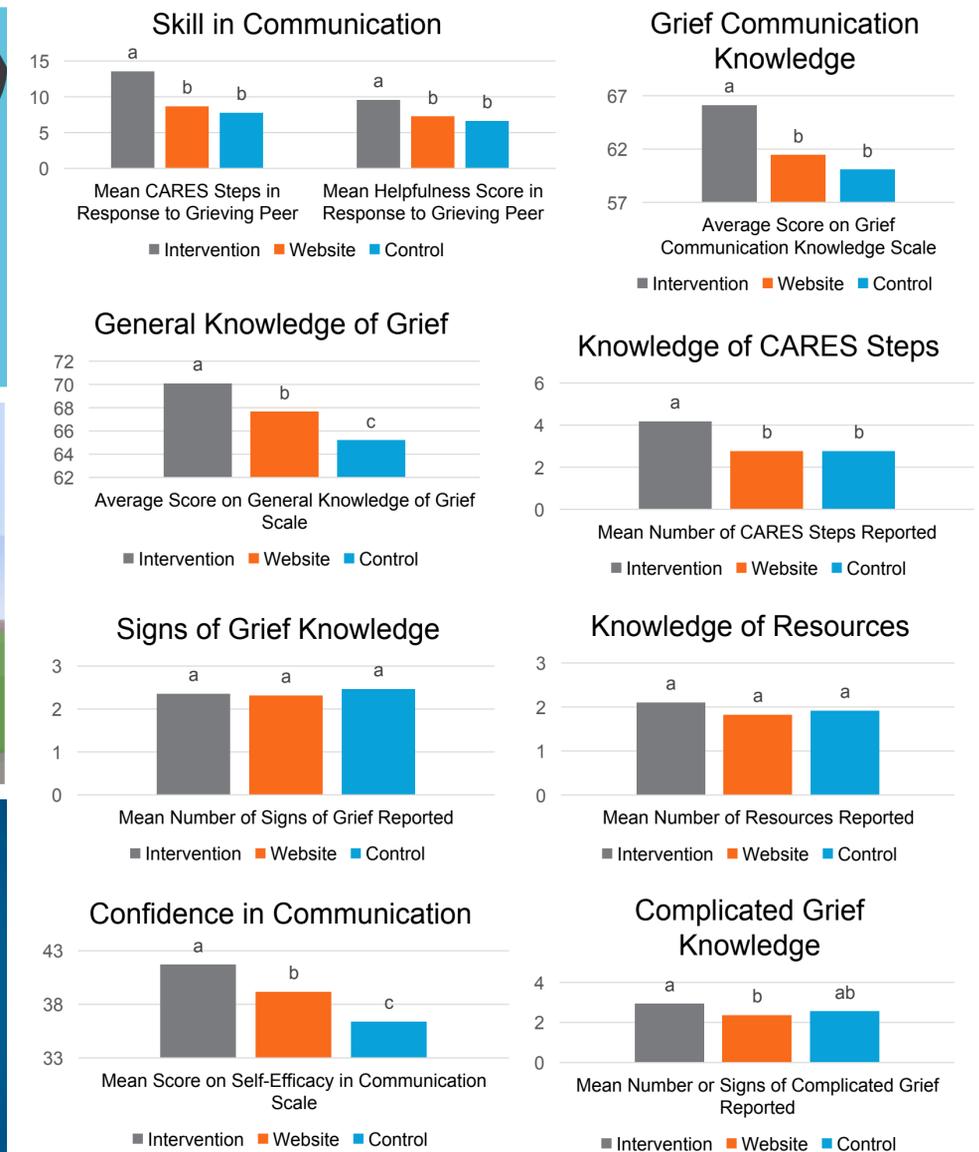
- Participants were recruited through an undergraduate psychology subject pool, social media, flyers, personal contacts, email listservs, and a randomly generated list of names obtained from the university registrar.
- Participants accessed an online Qualtrics survey and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions:
  - The CARES intervention
  - A website containing information about grief
  - A control condition.
- Participants completed pre- and post-test quantitative and qualitative measures to assess:
  - Knowledge of grief, appropriate responses to grieving peers, and resources for grieving college students
  - Confidence
  - Skills in communicating effectively with grieving peers.
- As a small incentive, participants received an Amazon.com gift card worth \$10.



## Intervention



## Results



Note. Estimated marginalized means that do not share superscripts differ  $p < .01$

## Conclusion

- College students who participated in the CARES intervention reported more knowledge about grief and grief communication, confidence in their ability to talk to peers who had experienced the death of a loved one, and skills with regard to what they would say (in person or via text), when compared to students in the website and control conditions. Should these findings be replicated, the CARES intervention may serve as a fiscally sustainable model to educate college students about helpful communication with bereaved peers and ultimately reduce the isolation felt by grieving college students.
- An important next step is to determine if improvement in knowledge, confidence and skill translates into actual behaviors and if these behaviors result in better outcomes for bereaved students.
- Future research also is needed to evaluate whether the CARES intervention indirectly improves outcomes for grieving students, such as grief symptoms, perceptions of social support, academic performance, and participation in risky behavior.