New tool identifies prolonged grief disorder much earlier

"If the future days without the loved one will not be refilled with happiness and meaning, what could motivate us to pull through the grief?" This inquiry has motivated this project. Seeking the meaning to live on is a natural mechanism of human beings. Many mourners could still live a productive and meaningful life despite feeling emotional distress for the loss of loved ones.

Although a majority of mourners are resilient towards the death of a loved one, around 9.8% of them suffer from a protracted and complex syndrome called Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). Individuals who develop PGD feel that they are ‘trapped’ by the grief, accompanied by symptoms such as persistent yearning to the deceased loved one, apathy to normal social functioning and work, feeling that life is meaningless, and even suicidal ideation. Timely psychotherapeutic support is therefore of imperative importance.

The main hindrance is that current diagnosis tools for PGD require a minimum six months post-loss, whereas administering intervention to normal grievers can hamper their natural coping mechanism. The diagnosis criteria conflict with the facts that prolonged grievers need immediate attention and providing targeting treatment can guarantee a more frugal implementation of the psychotherapeutic support resources.

To attend this issue, we have developed a screening method for PGD in the first six months of bereavement, in cooperation with researchers from both University of Memphis and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The final deliverable of the thesis is an internet-based self-screening application that is based on empirical data and can be accessed openly through the following website: https://www.designempowerment.com.

The tool is based on a survey among 611 respondents. It can be expected to correctly identifies about forty percent of PGD mourners based on the cross-validating result, almost right after losing a loved one, which enables timely interventions. It is applicable to mourners of the same cultural background as the respondents, who were recruited from the US and The Netherlands.