



THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Following World War II, many Greek immigrants arrived on Australian soil, including Georgia Panagiotopoulos’s grandparents.

Growing up with her grandparents around her in the Riverland region of South Australia, Ms Panagiotopoulos found their life stories fascinating, but she also observed how the loss of their significant other seemed to be considerably more difficult than for people of some other cultures. This experience inspired a very personal PhD journey.

“The Greek widows that I studied reported very negative impacts on their health and wellbeing, especially those who were quite dependent on their spouse and who may not have learnt much English,” Ms Panagiotopoulos said.

“There are a lot of changes that happen suddenly and the stress and grief combined can make it a really difficult experience for migrants who might not have much of their family here for support.”

Mourning the death of a spouse in the Greek community can be a drawn out process, often continuing until the remaining spouse passes away. Widows often wear black clothing to show their loss, and mourning rituals are frequently extensive.

Relatively few widows or widowers of Greek background remarry, regardless of their age at the time of their loss. These practices, while considered the norm culturally, may lead to increased rates of depression and loneliness, potentially affecting their health and wellbeing, Ms Panagiotopoulos said.

The research also found that health outcomes were compounded by a shortage of social networks outside the immediate family amongst these migrants who typically have lost their main source of comfort, support, and social interaction.

“Linking people with others in similar circumstances could lessen the loneliness and isolation experienced by widowed migrants,” Ms Panagiotopoulos said.

“Everyone needs someone to talk to, and when English isn’t your first language this can be a deceptively difficult thing to achieve.”

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