An all-consuming cumulonimbus of pain

20 years on from the release of “Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief” (Boss, 1999)

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Aims of today's talk

- To present a snapshot of the needs of Australian families of missing people from a 2018 survey
- To look at the last 20 years worth of research and practice-based explorations of better responding to families of missing people.
- To look at impact, intervention and enhancement of support needs from the experiences of:
  - Police
  - Counsellors
  - Media
- Finally, to co-create with the room, some ideas for where to from here
Did the survey of 72 people tell us anything new? (*hint*, kind of)

**Impact on the life of the respondent**

Irrespective of the perceived closeness of the relationship, the survey respondents noted overwhelmingly that the loss of the missing person ‘**disrupted my life in a significant manner and I still feel the impact**’ (n=55), fifteen people noted that ‘a disruption occurred, but they no longer feel this way’ or that the disruption occurred for a time limited period. Two noted that the disruption had ‘**somewhat**’ of an impact on their life.

It is important not to assume that the loss will be catastrophic for all, but that the length of time the person was missing can impact the ongoing nature of that trauma. It is also important not to presume, when offering support, that location of a body identifies closure for people. Those who noted that the loss was significant, and still continued, were also people where there had been a resolution to the missing person’s location.
If they could turn back time?

Respondents to the survey were asked to consider that, if circumstances or offers for help could have been revisited, the requests for support would have differed considerably to what had been offered at the time of the disappearance.

The majority stated practical help in negotiating with the Police, and search assistance would have been most useful (n=41), following that, counselling would have helped in terms of the impact of the loss (34). That practical assistance via their workplace through time off from work, or transfer of carer responsibilities to someone else, would also have reduced their burden, coupled with some financial assistance (17). Ten respondents noted that nothing at all would have helped.

Fourteen respondents shared short answer narratives relating to this question. Half of these noted that a more enhanced, systemic response from Police would have been optimal (‘police not having assumptions’, ‘the police to do their job properly’, ‘transparency from police’ in sharing health information about the missing person). Other assistance relating to key Government agencies connected with missing people such as coronial processes or legal support were also shared.
So, if ‘counselling’ is as an optimal inclusion what would it need to look like?

• The survey revealed that more than half of the respondents (41) did not access or receive counselling in relation to the loss of their missing person despite all answering ‘yes’ to the previous question that counselling would have helped them.

• Of those that did access counselling 10 people visited a generalist counselling services, four saw a grief counsellor, six engaged counsellors with specific skills in responding to the support needs of families of missing people and four accessed a telephone counselling service.

• For families in areas where specialised support wasn’t available families had to locate services themselves via the internet or word of mouth. Referrals were primarily self-referrals, with the Police and the person’s family or friends connecting people with counsellors in a small number of cases.

• Respondents noted that they were marginally satisfied with the counselling support they received (scoring the support 3.4 out of 5, from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied).
The survey revealed that the list of people who can ‘offer’ support can be vast however irrespective of who offers support – Police, counsellors, workplaces – the support needs to be person-centred and flexible to people’s needs changing over time.

There also seems to be a stigma attached: after a while people don’t want to know unless there is some sort of drama and so you tend not to say anything. My sister has been missing for 6 years. I constantly wonder what she’s been doing because so much has happened. Apart from my immediate family, not many people around me know; it just gets too hard having to explain it all the time. And while counselling might help it makes it hard if they don’t understand or specialise in the area. I hope that by completing this survey, the research impacts enough to have more people interested in the area as a specialty. We certainly need the support’.
What did the scoping review reveal?

What is ambiguous loss?

how does it differ from grief and bereavement where a level of certainty exists?

what are the therapeutic interventions required to assist families and friends of missing people?
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<th>Primary Theme</th>
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<td><strong>Theme 1: Defining the experience</strong></td>
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| **What is ambiguous loss?** | - Ambiguous loss is an unresolved grief, or grief with no ending (Boss, 1999)  
- Lived experience of complicated or anticipatory mourning, as well as disenfranchised grief may also be useful to apply. |
| **What is the difference between Ambiguous loss and grief?** | - Betz and colleagues (2006) note that the family’s capacity to ‘move on’ is ‘not a sign of immobility or inability to deal effectively with a situation, but the powerlessness exacerbated by the uncertainty’ (p.362).  
- Glassock (2006) noted that existing grief models can a sense of taboo in terms of discussing the possibility that the missing person may not be dead. |
| **Theme 2: Mapping reactions** | |
| **How do families and friends of missing people react?** | - Stress or anxiety about the whereabouts of the person (Boss, 1999, 2010)  
- Avoidance about the potential eventualities of the loss (Boss, 1999)  
- the reaction to waiting and the loss of control of a situation can be traumatised by the nature of the disappearance, as well as the imaginings as to what might be occurring for the person whilst their whereabouts are unknown (Wayland, 2015, Lenferink, 2018).  
- Intense sadness that no matter how hard they search they cannot locate the person (Glassock, 2009),  
- Confusion about the practical processes involved in searching or administering the affairs of the missing person (Clark, 2009) |
| **Unhelpful terms for families of missing people seeking therapeutic support** | ☐ Closure  
☐ Acceptance of the loss, without evidence to prove end of life.  
☐ Identifying hope as a positive response. |
| **What about support needs for people who have a loved one who is missing in the longer-term?** | ☐ Celebrating the life of the person not currently present  
☐ Spirituality, religion and rituals  
☐ Recognising cultural variations |
| **Theme 3: Evidenced based interventions which require more research regarding effectiveness** | |
| **Therapeutic intervention as noted by the literature** | Cognitive behavioural therapy with mindfulness (CBT-M)  
ABC-X model of family stress  
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)  
Mindful self-compassion |
What is the role of the Police?

Police are often the first responders when a person vanishes. The role law enforcement sits in an operational space – where investigative procedures are enacted depending on who is missing and under what circumstances.

The families of missing peoples’ focus is to have the missing person back with the goal of police intervention to locate the missing person or ensure their wellbeing. The intertwining of contact between families and the Police, at significantly traumatic periods, can lead to unintentional support provision. Remember the respondents of the survey attached to this project noted that the Police were in a position to understand and respond to their support needs best.

What is helpful for Police to understand about working alongside families of missing people?

Families of missing people, across a number of research studies, suggested that small things like communicating sensitively, calling when you say you will and communicating even when there is no news is helpful. For families of longer-term missing people that during periods of decreased hope – such as after a media appeal, or a sighting that does not eventuate in a location - that law enforcement could tread gently or help families to explore alternate supports would be helpful in the long term.

What might not be helpful?

Using terms like closure, acceptance and diminishing of hope. Families were not necessarily receptive to Police insistence that families should accept their loss. Matters being referred to the Coroner can also be a time of great stress and sadness for families.

Given Police are not employed to provide emotional support to families of missing people, it may be difficult to foresee, manage or support at every interval while the person remains missing. Both sides need to accept that vulnerability, and Police need to identify what support services are available in their jurisdiction that could support the ongoing needs of families.
Useful strategies for counsellors

What do counsellors need to consider before offering support?

Living with the disappearance of a missing person is a high-impact loss, counsellors experienced in this space of trauma, stress, grief and family therapy/conflict would have relevant skills.

- Be well-versed in evidence-based models of trauma, stress and loss
- Reflect on your own thoughts of ambiguity – how comfortable are you in tolerating the unknown?
- Name the loss that has occurred, normalize the experience of uncertainty and acknowledge and explore meaningful connections with their missing loved ones.
- Recognize that you can assist families to be the experts on their experiences.

Goals of the intervention:

There is no long-term goal in terms of the therapeutic outcomes of counselling for families of missing people other than to provide a safe space for people to explore the loss, to feel heard in relation to the impact of not knowing and to flexibly identify strategies that might assist them to manage the ruminations of ambiguity and the ways they can explore both hopefulness and hopelessness as their life continues.

The role of the counsellor is to identify that the concepts useful in exploring the lived experience of loss are available, as well as the therapeutic modalities and approaches that have been utilized both here in Australia and overseas to respond better to families and friends of missing people.

The goal for the counsellor might be to set aside what they think know about the experience of having someone missing, challenge the assumptions that may come from those thoughts and truly listen to help people challenge the ruminations that arise. Boss (1999) tells us that closure is not the goal, remaining person-centred and open to learning about the loss, even if it extends long term, is the key.
What about the media?

**Hope and media: the connection**

For media professionals it is important to understand that all created forms of media enhance hope. That hope can be absolute – that increased media will allow for the location of the missing person. It can also be quite small – a chance to remind the community that the family or Police are still searching or for clues to be shared.

**The philosophy behind why families of missing people engage with the media**

Part of the decision to connect with the media by the families searching for them can be at the request of the police as well as fulfilling the yearning to have ‘tried everything to bring them home’ (Wayland, 2008). Since the advent of social media families have become more media savvy but they can still be faced with the challenge that media interest is selective and dependent on if the disappearance is considered newsworthy (Moore, 2011).

**Understand the power of the missing person’s image**

When using the image of a missing person remember that the missing person’s picture is a way for families to actively show the pain of loss and a visual cue that demonstrates to the community that they have been left behind (Walsh, 2007). Respect the image as it allows to make the missing person relatable – families want to appeal to people’s capacity to recall who their loved one is and that they are lost.

**The ripple effect of media stories about missing people**

The media plays a role in shaping community perspectives. They can provide an eyewitness account of the details of what occurs when a person is missing and promote help-seeking for people living with the loss of a missing person.
What else should we be thinking about from here?

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