

“Unending not knowing”- lack of resolution and ambiguous loss

“People often say to me ‘oh, get over it’ but you don’t get over it, you just get used to it. There’s not a day that goes past where I [don’t] think ‘oh I wonder what’s happened’, it’s just a huge unanswered question, until you know you’ll never, ever stop thinking about it” (Promoting Connectedness, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, NSW, 2010).

Perhaps the biggest emotional challenge of a missing situation for families is the lack of resolution, *“the pain of not knowing and the mental torture of perhaps never knowing”* (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001). Missing People hears the agony of this over and over; many family voices echoing fear, confusion and bewilderment. It may seem there are no tangible reasons for the disappearance – especially if the missing person’s life seemed good or that their disappearance is out of character. In some cases, a suicide note may have been left and a family is waiting, anguished, for news the missing person has died. Agonisingly, this does not get easier for most and, for many, the pain worsens as time passes, as described in Living in Limbo, *“I think when somebody’s just missing it’s just hanging there. You don’t really know. It’s a little bit like a torture”* (Holmes, 2008).

Families feel suspended in this state of pain and uncertainty, unable to move forwards, plan or make life decisions. This state of being ‘in limbo’ – unable to grieve or to move on – creates a constant desire for answers about the missing person. As more time goes by, many feel any answer is preferable to not knowing at all, however, this need is contradicted by an underlying fear of finding out. Without a body, family members are unable to carry out the usual rituals, even in families where there is a strong sense the missing person is dead. Marking family events can present huge dilemmas, for instance, birthdays, anniversaries or Christmas (Holmes, 2008).

Missing Siblings expresses this as *“unending not knowing”* – touchingly described by one participant as, *“Not knowing is probably the worst thing. In the end, it takes control... Your control is lost”* (Clark, Warburton and Tilse, 2009).

This lack of resolution has given rise to theories on having someone missing.

Well-researched, a loss through death, is known to be a huge psychological trauma. Generally, it is agreed that people experiencing loss work through various psychological stages (Kübler-Ross 1969, Worden 1991) to reach acceptance. Occasionally, grief may be unresolved or delayed, preventing people from reaching acceptance and possibly causing mental health issues.

The tendency to see a missing situation as a type of bereavement is understandable – the families of missing people may experience many of the emotions associated with grief, however, it is far more complex. There is the pain of absence, but no evidence to suggest that the loss is ongoing or permanent.

Pauline Boss developed the concept of 'ambiguous loss' (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007), naming this as "the most distressful of all losses" (Boss, 1999). In relation to missing people she identifies that "a person is physically absent yet psychologically present" (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007). Therefore, the uncertainty and lack of information about an absent loved one is traumatic. The loss is not verified; the natural human need for meaning, sense, security, knowledge, finality and rituals are denied to the family.

There is no 'closure' or chance for resolution. People become preoccupied with thoughts about searching for the missing person. The resulting ambiguity "freezes the grief process" (Boss, 1999), often preventing one's ability to effectively process the situation emotionally, cope or make decisions. "Without information to clarify their loss, family members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence" (Boss, 2006).

There is ambiguity in terms of social status, where the missing person fits in, both now and in the future. Family members may create their own version of the 'truth' about the absent person – or may disagree about this. Friends and neighbours may not understand or know what to say – all areas of life are affected. Some people may reach a level of acceptance; however, the lack of certainty decreases the opportunities for recovery, acceptance and coping. In the *Missing Siblings* study, Clark, Warburton and Tilse (2008) support this, adding that, "Some participants suggested it took considerable time to recognise what was lost and to make sense of the implications of what had happened." Some family members have described their ambiguous loss as "leaving without goodbye" (Boss, 2007).

Although ambiguous loss cannot be 'resolved', Boss (2006), talks of a 'natural resiliency' amongst some people who are able to adapt their experience of the loss to develop an ability to live with the unanswered questions. 'Ambiguous loss' underpins many of the current studies, therapeutic models and practices to support families with a missing person.

Excerpted from "[*An Uncertain Hope: Missing People's overview of the theory, research and learning about how it feels for families when a loved one goes missing*](#)" developed by Missing People in conjunction with Same Cheatle (SANE, Macmillan Cancer Support), 2012. For the full guidebook and other publications, visit [Missing People](#).