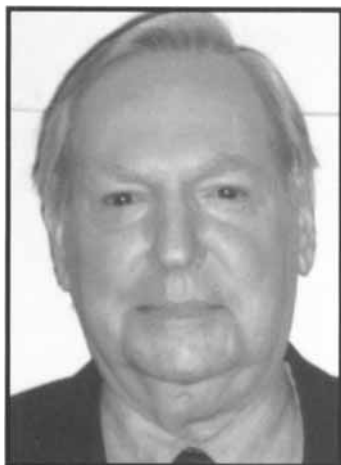


# Coping with uncertainty

## The grieving experience of families of missing people



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**THIS PAPER DESCRIBES THE BACKGROUND** to a research project on the grieving experience of families and friends of missing people. The introduction provides a brief historical overview of the experience of the early settlers in Australia through to the present day, showing it is a timeless problem here. The literature associated with the emotional impact experienced by families when a member goes missing is limited. However, attitudes to the emotional loss of such families are changing and the research seeks to 'listen to the stories' of these families so that appropriate care and support can be provided.

In the 19th century the idea of losing one's child in a strange and silent country reflected the depth of the white settlers' distrust of their new land and its Aboriginal inhabitants. Peter Pierce<sup>1</sup> explores this loss experience in his book, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*. Pierce drew on a wide range of sources from poetry, fiction and newspaper reports to art and cinema. Paintings such as Fred McCubbin's *Lost*, depicting a little girl and *Little Boy Lost*, of a youngster alone in bushland settings, reinforced in the minds of the Europeans the notion that the bush is a dangerous place for innocent young people. Missing children have also been the subjects of books, and recent films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in which several college students and their teacher disappear and *Evil Angels*, about the plight of baby Azaria Chamberlain, allegedly taken by dingoes at Uluru (Ayers Rock).

In the 21st century the lost child continues to torment that national consciousness. Pierce's book<sup>1</sup> analyses the cultural and moral implications of missing children in Australian history and illuminates a crucial aspect of our present condition. Hearing in the news about a child who is lost raises the level of anxiety and fear in the hearts and minds of parents. The image of a helpless, vulnerable child alone in the world is horrific but, for the public it is

a seven days' wonder whereas for the family it is a constant agony creating overwhelming anxiety, sadness and despair. The emblematic lost child of modern urban Australia is a victim of white society itself, subject to abuse, abandonment or abduction.

### A global problem

The plight of families of missing people has been heightened by the Tsunami devastation in 2004. Even now, long after the tragedy, thousands of people have not been found. A website revealed that, in addition to the grief of the families of those who are known to have died, a number of people from about 52 countries are also affected because their loved ones have not been traced. An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in January 2005<sup>2</sup> told the story of a memorial service in a small community just outside Stockholm where there were no coffins, just empty chairs representing the 22 people who had not returned. At the town hall an office was left vacant in wait for a missing employee. The comment was made, 'it is a strange kind of bereavement which lacks the closure that those being mourned are actually dead'.

Leonie Jacques<sup>3</sup>, in the report of her Churchill Fellowship said, 'Internationally there is dearth of research into, and service delivery directed to, the families and friends of missing persons.

### EDITOR'S NOTE

*Now that 'continuing bonds' are recognised as a frequent concomitant of grieving, the continuing bond to missing persons (who may or may not be dead) places the psychological reaction to such losses firmly within the ambit of Bereavement Care. People who suffer such losses occupy a liminal position between the bereaved and the non-bereaved. They may not qualify for, or want, the help of bereavement services, yet their distress, and the problems to which it gives rise, are no less great than they are after bereavement. The web sites and organisations available to help families of missing persons are more concerned with finding the missing and keeping hope alive, than they are with supporting those for whom hope is unrealistic. In this paper Geoffrey Glasscock brings home the dilemmas faced by this group CMP*

However the issues which face families and friends are starting to receive heightened attention at a state, national and international level'.

The problem of missing people is a global phenomenon. Massacres that regularly come to light in so many parts of the world leave millions unaccounted for. In the USA in 2001 it was reported that there were approximately 200,000 missing adults and this number did not include children or adults reported to non-police tracing

agencies. In the UK, 250,000 people are reported missing each year and in Australia the figure is estimated at 30,000 from a much smaller population. The majority of those who are reported to police are found, or return home, within a month of their disappearance; for the non-police search agencies, the location success is much lower. These statistics indicate the numbers of families and friends who are affected by people going missing. The impact on families and friends is independent of age, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, educational or professional background.

### Marginalising these losses

Adding to the plight of families, it appears that disappearances are a discounted statistic, seemingly not newsworthy (unless it is a child who is missing) and irrelevant to the political agenda of a nation. In Australia, state and federal governments were challenged recently when it was found some Australian citizens who were reported 'missing' had been in fact either deported by the Department of Immigration or placed in detention centres. These people, born overseas, had migrated to Australia and become Australian citizens. When they developed mental and physical health problems which made them vulnerable, the national bureaucracy failed them and they were badly treated. Their families only learned of their plight when the press made their treatment public.

A positive outcome arising from these sad situations is that the problem of missing persons has been highlighted. It is suggested that for every one person who goes missing, 12 others are affected.

### Why do people go missing?

Henderson and Henderson<sup>4</sup> in their report, *Missing People*, give a list of possible reasons why people go missing. They include: missing by design, looking for adventure, missing overseas, escaping, lost at sea, missing because of mental health issues or because the person was lost or forgetful. The Australian federal police Missing Persons unit regularly publishes posters of photographs of 'the long term missing'. The posters are

displayed in police stations, government offices and non-government agencies involved with street people and the homeless.

The formal definition of a missing person used by law enforcement agencies is 'anyone who has been reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and where there are concerns for the safety or concerns for the welfare of that person'. The National Committee on Missing Persons<sup>5</sup> felt that a simpler short definition would be more consumer-friendly and accessible to the public. Their suggested alternative is that 'Missing ... is when you are concerned because you can't find someone'.

The committee came up with five elements of missing which expand on that consumer-friendly, short definition. These are:

- 'Knowingly' missing – when a person needs to disconnect
- 'Unknowingly' missing – when a person is unaware that someone is looking for them
- 'At risk' missing – when a person is a risk through suspicious /dangerous circumstances
- 'Lost' and missing – when a person is accidentally separated
- 'Removed' and missing – when a person is separated through policy, disaster or conflict

### Grief after someone goes missing

In 2003, the Family and Friends of Missing Persons (NSW) held a one-day conference at which I was asked to speak on the 'Grief of families of missing persons'. The Missing Persons unit (within the NSW Attorney General's department) had appointed a specialist counsellor and the conference was to raise the level of awareness among families and friends of missing persons of counselling opportunities as a way of managing their grief.

In the presentation I pointed out that the existing grief models, while in part useful, perhaps created more problems than they solved. Families remarked that they were dissatisfied and often angry when counsellors 'trotted out stages of grief' as a way of trying to help them. For these families the grief models used by the counsellors sug-

gested to them that the counsellors were assuming the missing person was dead. This was a taboo because it took away any thread of hope they were holding on to. The idea of 'closure' as the end point of grief models was not acceptable, hence the counselling was deemed unhelpful.

In 2001 the Hunter Institute of Mental Health completed a study for the Families and Friends of Missing Persons which explored the question 'Are the grief models appropriate?', attempting to discover a best practice model for these families. The major finding of the report, *It's the Hope that Hurts*<sup>6</sup>, was that although over 150 publications in relation to loss and grief were located, only five related specifically to the experience of families of missing persons. This, then, is an area that theory and research has generally ignored.

### The research project

The Henderson report<sup>7</sup> had shown the impact on family, friends and society when a person goes missing. It highlighted the health consequences – physical and emotional – on families, the financial and legal difficulties they encounter, the impact on work performance and business activities as well as overall quality of life issues. In order to understand better the 'lived experience' of families with a missing person, I undertook a research project.

### Literature search

A search of the literature revealed that most theorists start from a death perspective. My study begins from a loss perspective, where grief fits into the puzzle but it is not the whole. The question then is: 'What are the missing parts?'

The trauma of loss is expressed by Bowlby<sup>8</sup> in *Loss, Sadness and Depression* where he comments:

Loss of a loved person is one of the most intensely painful experiences any human being can suffer. And not only is it painful to experience but it is also painful to witness, if only because we are impotent to help. To the bereaved nothing but the return of the lost person can bring true comfort. Should what we provide fall short of that, it is felt almost as an insult. That, perhaps, explains a bias that runs through so much of the older literature on how human

beings respond to loss. ... there is a tendency to underestimate how immensely distressing and disabling loss usually is and for how long the distress, and often the disablement commonly lasts.

Bowlby's statement emphasises two things: the pain of the loss when a person goes missing, and the feelings of helplessness by professionals and others in trying to help and comfort the families.

### Existing models of grief

A survey of some of the models of grief reveals that no reference is made to the grief experienced by families and friends of missing persons. Bertha Simos<sup>9</sup> in her work *A Time to Grieve: Loss, a Universal Human Experience* talked of various categories of loss and identified four: loss of a significant person, loss of the part of self, loss of external objects, and developmental loss. In none of these categories did she refer to the loss of a missing person, even in that category of a loss of a significant person. Ken Doka<sup>10</sup> opened up the important concept of disenfranchised grief, in his book of that name. Families of missing persons can acknowledge they feel disenfranchised and not understood, but even Doka does not refer specifically to this population.

One of the pioneers in the area of loss and grief was Elisabeth Kubler Ross<sup>11</sup> who in 1969 published her five stages of grief as they relate to death and dying. One can acknowledge that denial, anger, bargaining and depression are probably experienced by those grieving the loss of a person who has 'gone missing', but the final stage of acceptance in her model is extremely problematic. If we look at Parkes and Weiss<sup>12</sup> who in their grief work talked of three tasks for recovery, the very first task is in fact a problem. They talk of 'intellectual recognition and explanation of the loss'. The stumbling block for families of missing people is that often there is no explanation, so the progression to being able to 'emotionally accept the loss' is virtually an impossibility.

Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut<sup>13</sup> in their dual process model of grief describe what many grieving people experience and therefore can relate to. They talk of two types of stressors

which are either loss or restoration oriented and observe that we seem to have a dynamic, regulatory coping process of oscillation. Grieving people at times confront the pain and at other times avoid it. Stroebe and Schut refer to it as 'a dose of grieving – then a respite'.

Neimeyer<sup>14</sup> suggests that adaptation to loss involves the 'restoration of coherence' to our lives. When the person is still missing the loss is frequently overwhelming, so recovering a sense of coherence is impossible while the family of the missing person is coping with uncertainty. The emphasis in recent years of 'continuing bonds' is a highly significant concept for these families because this concept acknowledges that out of sight does not mean out of mind.

### A new framework

It would seem that while grief is involved in the experience of families of missing people, what we understand of the grieving process does not provide a sufficient theoretical framework on which to base this study. The emphasis thus needs to shift from grief to the overall question of loss. When viewed from this loss perspective, the notion of 'ambiguous loss' which Pauline Boss<sup>15</sup> developed becomes a better framework within which to view the experience of families of missing persons.

### Yearning and searching

When ambiguous loss is coupled with John Bowlby's work on attachment and loss, the emotional and psychological implications become apparent. Families of missing people seem to vacillate between hope and despair so the concept of 'yearning and searching' to which Bowlby refers characterises these families. Raphael *et al*<sup>16</sup> say 'for many bereaved persons there is a hyper-vigilant quality to the searching as they search the environment for the cues (and clues) of the lost person'. A similar thought is expressed by Field *et al*<sup>17</sup> when they talk of 'continuing bonds in bereavement from an attachment theory based perspective'. They suggest that 'certain continuing bond expressions displayed early on in bereavement are considered to be indicative of such searching attempts to reclaim the dead person'. This means

the families go to places frequented by the person, they misperceive others for the lost attachment figure and all reflect a desire to re-establish physical proximity to that lost person. They report expending vast amounts of time and energy responding to any possible sightings of a missing person, searching areas where that person was last believed to have been, all the while yearning for some ray of hope to dispel their gloom.

Sydney Zisook<sup>18</sup> talks of 'unresolved grief' in *The Biopsychological Aspects of Bereavement*. From his study he reports that the most commonly endorsed items in their grief inventory ten or more years after a bereavement were: no one will ever take his/her place; I very much miss the person; I can't avoid thinking about them; sometimes I dream about them; even now it is painful to recall memories of them; I still get upset when I think about them; people around me still remind me of them. These comments are similar to the ones that families of missing persons express.

### An integrative approach

In *Towards an Integrative Perspective on Bereavement*, Bonanno and Kaltman<sup>19</sup> raise a number of perspectives which have relevance to this project. They suggest that by applying general psychological perspectives to bereavement it is possible to include a cognitive stress perspective (cognitive appraisal and coping), an attachment perspective (continuing bonds and ambivalence), a trauma perspective (traumatic loss, meaning of the loss, talking about the loss), and ideas about psychosocial transitions, and assumptive worlds. This broader perspective, coupled with Pauline Boss' notion of ambiguous loss, was chosen to provide a framework for approaching the interviews with families of missing people and the attempt to understand their lived experience.

### Methodology

In keeping with the phenomenological method, a broad, all-encompassing, open-ended question will be used to begin the interview: 'Can you tell me about your experience since (name of person) went missing?' While not wanting to pre-empt the content of the interviews it is anticipated that they

will traverse such things as:

Who went missing?

Under what circumstances?

What explanations do they have as to why the person went missing?

How they have coped with the person going missing?

Past relationship with the person?

Kind of support that was offered?

What they have found most difficult to cope with?

Whether religious/spiritual faith/support has been important to them?

A narrative methodology is being used to examine the transcripts.

Holly Prigerson has given permission for us to adapt her Inventory of Traumatic Grief<sup>20,21</sup> (now referred to as the Inventory of Complicated Grief – Revised) by inserting ‘missing person’ in the place of ‘death’. Following the interview, participants will be asked to complete the inventory questionnaire with the aim of discovering whether these families fit into the dimensions of the Traumatic Grief Inventory.

### The first interviews

The interviews conducted so far have involved mothers, fathers and siblings of missing people. Those families interviewed have, all but one, had a son go missing. The other missing person was a Vietnam veteran whose body was subsequently found in his car in another state. His wife said that while finding him was a relief it also raised more questions about her husband. In two of the families there were arguments over a period of time prior to the son going missing. Mental ill health (bipolar disorder) was evident in three of the young missing men, and drugs were also involved in a number of cases. Stories told by members of one family varied, revealing the different ways in which gender and age affect emotional impact and coping strategies.

It is hoped the research will provide the basis for a more effective way of helping families as they face the reality of the ambiguity of living with a person missing. ●

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Sudden Death in Childhood

Support for the Bereaved Family

Ann Dent, Alison Stewart



Oxford, UK:  
Butterworth  
Heinemann  
2004  
225pp  
£22.99 pb  
0 75065 646 8

This book is aimed specifically at nurses and midwives in both hospital and community settings. It is most attractively laid out and written with great respect and compassion.

The opening chapters look at bereavement in the context of family life, and this is followed by a very good overview of different theoretical models. Bereavement issues are then considered from the perspective of

the various members of the family: parents, other children, and grandparents. The final section covers ways in which professionals can support the bereaved, both immediately and over time.

This is a comprehensive, wide-ranging treatment which includes some topics that are not usually mentioned, such as the taking of photographs. Complicated grief is referred to very briefly, but then presumably this is unlikely to be the focus of the intended audience.

I thought this book was excellent and have not come across anything that covers this subject as well for the intended audience. It would be useful for anyone who is offering support to those bereaved by the sudden death of a child, particularly those whose main job is not bereavement care. ●

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