

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

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What are we hoping to achieve in this training?

1

To introduce and understand what ambiguous loss is.

2

To identify current evidence-based research about the practical and emotional support of ambiguous or unresolved loss/es.

3

To reflect on how we can tolerate ambiguity, in order to better support families left behind.

What is the current prevalence of ‘missing’ in our community?

According to data gathered in 2022 by the AFP (Australian Federal Police), around 55,000 missing person reports are received by police annually. **This translates to 150 reports a day to police.**

Imagine the impact on 150 communities seeking news of a missing person.

The majority of people who disappear are aged between 13–17 years.

Most people reported missing are vulnerable. Bricknell and Renshaw (2016) found those most likely to go missing are ‘persons with a mental illness (e.g. anxiety and depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or other psychotic illness), persons expressing suicidal ideation, and those with dementia, an intellectual or physical disability or without lifesaving medication. Additional groups that may be at an elevated risk of harm include persons known or thought to have been last located in potentially life-threatening environmental conditions (e.g. lost at sea).’ (p. 18)

Almost all reports (98%) were successfully resolved. Missing people are primarily located alive.

Australian police jurisdictions define a missing person as someone whose whereabouts are unknown, and that there are concerns for their safety and wellbeing.

What is ambiguous loss?

Ambiguous loss is a term coined and then defined by Boss (1999) as 'unending, not knowing' given that certainty as to when the loss will end is not possible.

The connection between uncertainty and ongoing stress and/or anxiety is an important first step to remember. The sense of having to accept that information about the person and how to bring them home is unclear, is a cruel loss to witness.

What are the impacts of ambiguous loss?

Irrespective of the type of professional or personal relationship we have to the family, factors such as those listed below, will mean everyone has a different reaction to loss.

- **Time since missing**
- **Circumstance surrounding why the person is missing**
- **Relationship to missing person**
- **Previous histories of trauma**
- **Engagement with services**
- **The internal capacity for a person to learn to live alongside ambiguity**

There is no one-size-fits-all model, but we do know that some strategies are far more effective than others.

How does the research explain this type of loss?

Ambiguous loss

The term ambiguous loss (sometimes interchangeably referred to as 'unresolved grief' in the literature) identifies the physical absence of the individual without confirmation as to whether or not the loss has finality or a known outcome. (Boss, 1999, 2004)

Complicated or anticipatory mourning

Rando's exploration (2000) of complicated mourning does have some relevance for families of missing people, as it allows a space for exploring grief without making people feel as if they are 'failing' at the tasks of mourning, because it acknowledges all of the complexity that comes with a unique type of loss like missing.

Disenfranchised grief

This grief, as noted by Doka (2002) is defined as a type of grief that is not commonly recognised by the community – it sits outside the 'expected' losses we experience in our lifetime.

Common reactions you might see when working with families of missing people

Stress or anxiety about the whereabouts of the person, the reaction to waiting and the loss of control of a situation.

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.

Intense sadness and frustration that no matter how hard they search they cannot locate the person.

Disconnection from the community around them in terms of people going about their lives, unaffected by the loss that they — the left behind — are consumed by.

Confusion about the practical processes involved in searching or administering the affairs of the missing person.

Avoidance — coping can sometimes be managed by a sense of cognitive avoidance; sometimes by avoiding the circumstance entirely (such as the significant findings of the investigation, the potential for sightings etc.) or suggesting the person might come back when all available evidence says otherwise.

Physical and/or physiological conditions in relation to extended periods of stress (e.g. digestive health and auto-immune conditions).

Psychological burnout associated with compassion fatigue, pushing authorities that they believe are supposed to be helping, and the repetitive retelling of their story.

What does research tell us about the impact?

Wayland and Maple (2020) note that irrespective of the **perceived closeness of the relationship**, the loss of the missing person **'disrupted my life in a significant manner and I still feel the impact.'**

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 symbolises 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.

Locating a body doesn't always provide closure. Missing is not a dress rehearsal for grief (Wayland, 2015).

What support would people have liked if they had their time over again?

A survey undertaken in 2019 asked families 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, following that, counselling would have helped in terms of the impact of the loss.

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.

Respondents noted that the police and their own friends and families were also in a position to understand and respond to their support needs best, following counselling services specifically supporting families of missing people.

What about the role of Police in the lives of families of missing people?

In previous research (Wayland, 2015), families left behind shared that they had a belief that if a person cannot be found, the police will 'step in and locate them' and that this world view can become problematic once someone goes missing.

For families, the letting go of the concept (that the police could solve the mystery of the missing person's disappearance) was something they had to accept but that there was trauma attached to these thoughts.

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. In addition, counsellors being available long-term was desirable rather than short-term interventions.

Why is it important to understand the operational impacts of missing?

What is important to emphasise (as noted by Rosenblatt, 2017) in identifying how counsellors may respond to families of missing people, is that **when a person vanishes, the family must acquire knowledge about 'one thousand things they should never have to learn'** (p. 758).

That this sudden immersion can be about how policing works, understanding court processes (including coronial matters) and bureaucratic procedures that they may have had the luxury of previously being ignorant to.

**In short,
their world
view shifts.
*Forever.***

What about media?

Community campaigns related to the missing person naturally include media involvement.

It's 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.

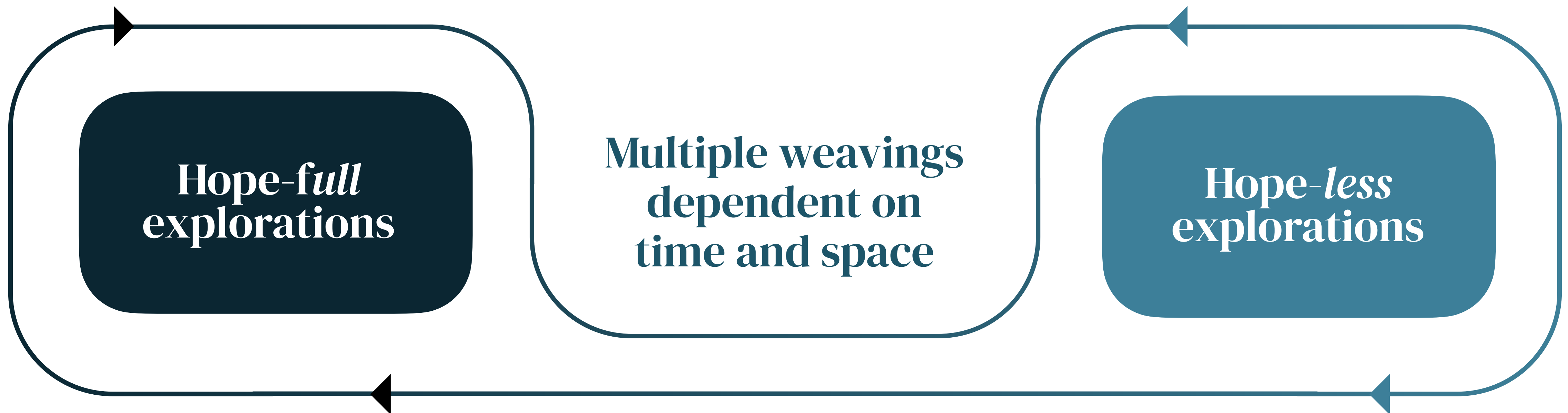
It can also be quite small – a chance to remind the community that the family or police are still searching or seeking information.

What we know from conversations with families of missing people is that this period of enhanced hope can be tempered with sadness when the location of the missing person is not the conclusion of media involvement.

Involvement with the media is a direct strategy used by families to ensure that they create any opportunities, by any means necessary, to demonstrate their search for the person.

Honest conversations can sometimes be a vehicle to explore the 'hope hangover' that can come from increased excitement that their case may be solved.

What do we know about the role of hope for families of missing people?



“When I have been contacted about a possible sighting, it gives me hope she is still alive. It makes me want to rush out and track down the sighting. However, information supplied is often lacking and makes it difficult to get started.

The hard truth is...*when there's a sighting I feel hope and excitement, but it almost always turns to fear and disappointment.*”

— Brother of a woman missing for 26 years

What is the goal of engaging people in their hope narratives?

Boss (1999) tells us that closure is not the goal in providing support to people left behind, instead remaining focused on their story, their needs and what support they feel they need. Being open to learning about their unique loss, even if it extends long-term, is the key.

Using The Hope Narratives as your own reflection tool, with the families you connect with, or with your team to better understand the complexity of ambiguous loss is an important step in upskilling.

Tolerated ambiguity is the first professional step of the person providing support. Even the Police.



Thank you

To access the full Ambiguous Loss Masterclass,
including Advanced Skills Training, please go to
missed.org.au/alm

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