

# Families and Missing

## Key Points

- A range of impacts on families can be noted, including emotional, social and financial strains.
- The concept of 'ambiguous loss' can be used to define the unique sense of loss experienced by families of missing people, where a lack of information means closure is difficult to achieve (Boss, 1999, 2002, 2007).
- A lack of statutory support exists to help families deal with the legal and financial impacts families encounter when a close relative goes missing (Holmes, 2008:34).
- In 2008 Missing People published *Living in Limbo* (Holmes, 2008), the first comprehensive study into the experiences of those left behind when a family member goes missing.

## Background

Whilst a wide variety of research has been conducted into the experiences of the estimated 250,000 people who are reported missing to the police and other agencies each year (The Home Office, 2010: 5), much less has been written about the families left behind. This fact is reflected in the legislative provisions for the families of missing people, which are scarce and inadequate.

## Ambiguous Loss

Pauline Boss developed the concept of 'ambiguous loss' (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007). In relation to missing people she identifies ambiguous loss as the result of 'a person [being] physically absent yet psychologically present' (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007). The lack of information or 'closure' available to families means they experience the loss in a different way than, for example, a bereavement. The loss is not verified; the natural human need for meaning, sense, security, knowledge, finality and rituals are denied to the family. The resulting ambiguity 'freezes the grief process' (Boss, 1999), often preventing one's ability to effectively process the situation emotionally, cope or make decisions.

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.

## Emotional

Wayland writes that 'families of missing persons respond in similar ways to those exposed to a sudden trauma: shock distress, confusion, ambivalence and a considerable sense of being overwhelmed' (Wayland, 2007: 11).

This notion of an initial emotional turbulence of competing and often conflicting emotions is one that is echoed by Payne, who suggests the early confusion and distress is replaced in the longer term by a move toward an interrupted grief process (Payne, 1995: 343).

*Unhappiness, anxiety and despair*- One participant in *Living in Limbo* stated they 'had never in their life and still haven't experienced such excruciating pain' (Holmes, 2008: 19). This profound despair and unhappiness may be accompanied by a huge amount of anxiety, both for the welfare of the missing person, and the impact on their own lives of that person going missing.

*Guilt and self blame*- Another common emotional response to a family member going missing is a sense of guilt, shame or embarrassment, stemming from a sense of responsibility for a family member running away. Holmes (2008) locates 4 key areas in which this sense of guilt tends to have its origins. Guilt was felt for; not having prevented the disappearance; having caused the disappearance; not having discovered the disappearance quickly enough; or for not doing more to have found the missing person.

*Anger and frustration*- Families have also alluded to a sense of anger and frustration in response to the situation. This anger may be directed toward the missing person, themselves, other family members, or those outside the family unit, depending on who they perceive to be at fault for the situation. Anger and frustration may also be directed at the police or other organisations for not finding the missing person or for the perception that they are not making enough of an effort to locate the person.

*Hope*- *Missing Siblings* explains that hope can help to cope with emotions that are too overwhelming; one sibling stated, 'maybe that's just hope, hope for the fact that you can actually live your life again and not live in a constant... void, I guess' (Clark, Warburton and Tilse, 2009: 274). The study *Promoting Connectedness* notes that families are reluctant to discuss what may have happened to someone, for fear this may be perceived as giving up hope (New South Wales Government, 2010: 7).

*Powerlessness*- One of the overriding emotions expressed by families of missing people is a sense of powerlessness. This feeling, of being unable to change or influence the situation, regardless of how hard they try, is one that informs many of the emotional responses outlined above.

Participants in *Living in Limbo* described a variety of different strategies of coping with the loss and emotional turmoil. These included counselling, medication, religious faith, consulting psychics and mediums, and turning to friends and family (Holmes, 2008: 26-29). Emotional impacts can present themselves as physical symptoms and can result in sleeplessness, stress and generalised ill health.

## **Social**

The study *Missing Siblings* states that 'most participants felt relationships with others in their family of origin, as well as friends, partners and children changed when their sibling went missing' (Clark et al, 2008: 273). Family members may experience differing emotional reactions to the disappearance which may lead to conflict. In addition, the increased communication necessary between family members during the search and in the longer term can put stress on relationships, particularly where these are strained to begin with.

Low self esteem may be a consequence of a family member going missing. Family members left behind may doubt their skills and abilities, particularly if they feel guilt regarding the person going missing and as such feel as though they may have failed to fully support the family member.

Whilst negative changes can occur, some families interviewed in *Living in Limbo* described positive changes in the relationships between family members. Increased communication between family members was attributed to a practical need for collaboration during the search, and a desire to appreciate each other more and comfort one another (Holmes, 2008: 21-22).

With regard to informing those outside the immediate family of a person being missing, participants in *Living in Limbo* reported a variety of responses, from positive and supportive encouragement to continue the search, to nosiness or hurtful responses. Though few families actually reported negative reactions many chose not to tell people for fear of negative reactions (Holmes, 2008: 22-23).

### **Financial, Legal and other Practical Impacts**

In addition to the emotional and social strains having a family member go missing can place on those left behind, a huge amount of financial pressure and practical difficulties can accumulate.

Families may spend money on searching for a missing person, either by travelling abroad or throughout Britain, or by producing leaflets and posters and paying for advertising space. In addition to these immediate costs, searching for a missing person may have additional financial repercussions in that time may be taken off work, or jobs even lost, to accommodate the search (Holmes, 2008: 31).

In addition to the cost of the search, the loss of a missing person's earnings may impact on the financial stability of the family, or in any case create a great deal of uncertainty. Some participants interviewed in *Living in Limbo* spoke of paying a missing family member's bills or covering their debts in a bid to maintain their lifestyle for when they return (Holmes, 2008: 32).

Dealing with the legal affairs of a missing person can also be costly, particularly where expert advice is required. Particular confusion surrounds the length of time for which a person must be missing before an official presumption of death can be declared. This difficulty can exasperate financial impacts as marriages may be unable to be dissolved and life insurance unable to be claimed (Holmes, 2008: 33).

### **Service Providers and the Media**

*Living in Limbo* interviewed a number of family members about their experiences dealing with the police and other service providers. The study suggested that a family's perception of the quality of services provided can affect their emotional wellbeing.

The key influences on their satisfaction with service providers were found to be (Holmes, 2008: 12):

- Whether they believed that everything possible was being done to find the missing person
- The extent to which they had been taken seriously
- How well the services they received met their initial expectations
- The personal manner of the service providers
- The quality and consistency of long term contact
- How well they were kept informed of developments (or lack thereof)

Families reported confusion about arrangements for sharing information between service providers and other organisations and institutions, in particular about the ways in which Data Protection procedures may act as a barrier to search efforts (Holmes, 2008:37).

Families often feel obliged to use the media to help search for their missing family member, despite this process often being stressful and challenging. Families' continued use of the media can be understood to play both a practical role in continuing the search, and an emotional one in helping families to fulfil their perceived duty of keeping up the momentum of the search (Holmes, 2008:39).

## References

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