

NALAG News

National Association for Loss & Grief (NSW) Incorporated

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The Grief of Missingness

In Australia approximately 35,000 people go missing each year. Families of missing persons live in the space between knowing and not knowing. This is the grief of missingness. In this article Dr Geoff Glassock looks at the missing person phenomenon from a grief and loss perspective touching on current research and understandings.

Inside this issue...

- The Grief of Missingness: The Plight of Families of Missing Persons
- It's the hope that hurts
- Distinguishing Grief and Depression
- Suffer little children: why we need to talk



On the cover

This issue of the NALAG News's cover photo has been selected to represent that missing piece of the puzzle that is often felt by the family and friends of missing persons.

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MISSING

The Grief of Missingness: The Plight of Families of Missing Persons



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Geoffrey Glassock is a Counselling Psychologist with initial training in Marriage and Family Counselling before becoming involved with issues of loss and grief and trauma following the Granville train disaster in 1977. He has been involved with the National Association for Loss and Grief since its inception in 1977.

On Australia Day 2010 Geoffrey was awarded the Order of Australia (AM) for his work in the area of loss, grief and bereavement. He has particular research interests in the Grief of Missingness, Mental Health and Missing People particularly with Indigenous Australians. He is the former NSW Chairperson of the APS College of Counselling Psychologists and is on the National Executive of the College. He continues as an Adjunct Lecturer and Supervisor at the University of New England.

In recent weeks the media has been following up possible leads into the disappearance of William Tyrell from his grandmother's home in Kendall, NSW. This small rural community has been shocked and devastated since this child went missing on 12th September 2014. Despite police, other agencies and members of the community spending time and effort into searching for the little boy their work has not given them answers. This new information has raised the hopes of the family and the community that it will tell them what has happened to William. Whenever a child goes missing the intensity of the media's reporting gives expression to the fear and dread of every parent. When an adult goes missing the same attention to their disappearance is often not recognised, or publicised, unless it is a 'high profile' individual or family member.

In Australia approximately 35,000 people go missing each year; of those missing persons reported to the police, the majority were from metropolitan areas of the larger states of NSW, Victoria and Queensland. Similar to the UK study (James et al, 2008) more males aged 20 -24 years went missing by design and for people 65 years and over, going missing could be unintentional due to Alzheimers, senile dementia or other mental health problems. Twice as many young females in NSW went missing as young males (James, 2008). The number included young Aboriginal women who are amongst those most at risk.

In trying to understand why it is that people go missing Henderson and Henderson (1998, p.6) gave a list of possible reasons. They included: mainly Missing presumed dead –

people missing for many years even when there has been an extensive police investigation, missing without reason – long term missing people who simply disappear, missing by design and missing to escape – young people who intentionally go missing to escape abuse or some other negative situation, missing to suicide, missing – lost or forgetful, mental health issues, missing – lost at sea, missing overseas of parental abduction, missing – separated by war, missing through natural and/or man-made disasters.

These characteristics to categorise missing persons still remain an accurate description. Those who remain missing for at least six months are usually termed the 'long term missing'. Where and when people go missing is totally unpredictable and is linked with why and how they went missing.

Stories of families of missing persons

In a study of families of missing persons in which I was involved, *Australian Families of Missing People: Narrating their Lived Experience*, (Glassock, 2011) I approached the topic from a loss and grief perspective as that was the area I had been working in for some years. The impetus for this study came as a result of an invitation to speak to the NSW Families and Friends of Missing Persons committee day conference in 2003 on the subject of the grief of families of missing persons. It was at that point that I discovered that this was not a subject that found expression in the grief and bereavement literature or research (Waring, 2001).

Listening to the comments from the families and friends on that day prompted a need to explore this further and understand from their perspective what it means to live with a long-term missing person within a trauma, loss and grief framework. In exploring the literature and talking to the families of missing persons, the grief models were problematic. They were death related, so counsellors who used a grief model in their attempt to help the family were met with hostility and opposition. The families thought the counsellors were making an assumption that their missing person was dead. This took away their hope. This led me to the idea that the grief of missingness is something distinct and different.

New understandings on loss and grief

The approach to understanding loss and grief has changed considerably over the last 20 years. One development has been the way the use of words and terminology has changed over recent years. For instance, the words closure, acceptance and resolution along with the term grief work have virtually disappeared or have been used in a different way in the current grief lexicon. The emergence of terms like disenfranchised grief, continuing bonds and meaning-making are now resonating with the experience of grieving people and have become the focus of researchers. The notion of disenfranchised grief has shown that many of the losses people have a grief outcome that is often not recognised. Simos (1979) in *A Time of Grieve* (1979) recognised loss as a universal human experience. However it was not until 1999 that Boss used the term 'ambiguous loss' to more accurately describe the experience of families of missing persons. What families of missing people experience when someone they love disappears can be understood as traumatic, and it is this trauma that creates the loss and grief.

Apart from the work of Boss (1999, 2006) the general literature on traumatic loss does not address this particular aspect of the psychological impact on families of missing people. This lack of recognition of missing persons as a traumatic experience raises the question that is covered next.

Where do loss and grief fit in the experience of Missing People?

The notion of relinquishing the bonds to the deceased, ie. terminating the relationship with that person as espoused by Freud (1917) in 'Mourning and Melancholia' is part of his idea of 'grief work'. This notion of relinquishing the bonds to the deceased, that is, terminating a relationship with that person, and moving on, is a reflection of modernist thinking that predominated in most of the twentieth century. In the humanities, like psychology, the scientific paradigm was found to be wanting as it failed to understand and allow for the human condition. Since the 1980s the loss and grief research focus has broadened (Doka, 1989, Klass et al, 1996, Neimeyer, 2001, Stroebe et al, 2002).



Volunteer Profile

Ruth Gobbitt

Coordinator

NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief, Mudgee

Ruth is the Co-ordinator of the Mudgee Branch of NALAG which opened its doors in 2014. Here she speaks to Jorie Ryan about how and why she became involved in NALAG.

How did you become involved in NALAG?

I was working in dementia care in Mudgee when I first heard about NALAG. I could see how NALAG helped both clients and their families. I found NALAG had a role to play. I did the basic training and thought it would be a good program to become more involved in when I retired.

And then ...?

Well, when I retired, a group met to look at setting up a branch of NALAG in Mudgee. Before that people had to access Dubbo which provided wonderful support but we felt Mudgee was ready to establish a group of its own. I was volunteered, says Ruth with a grin, for the role of co-ordinator. I would have quietly sat back and waited to see where I could fit. As it happened, it was a wonderful project to take on in that space between retirement and working out what I was going to do. Well I found out pretty fast! We had a very supportive group and began the hard work of establishing a branch here. The Dubbo Branch was a great help. We were given a house rent free from Kanandah (one of the aged care facilities in Mudgee) and set to work to renovate- painting, tearing up old carpet, moving doorways, rejuvenating the garden. And of course people would stop by to see what we were doing. Furniture came from everywhere and suddenly we were ready.

What do you feel you bring to the role of co-ordinator?

I use the skills I had developed in my working life. I feel it is important to be able to communicate effectively, to listen to people's stories. I can also delegate, which is important as there is a risk of burn out for volunteers as well as me. I have lived in Mudgee all my life so when we were looking for people who might be interested in volunteering I had a work base

and friendship network to draw on. That said, we have had a wonderful response from articles in the local newspaper and market days. I also spoke to the local service clubs. The team of volunteers comes from all walks of life with differing life experiences and skills. There is a role for everyone whether it be gardening, seeing clients, making tea or helping out at open days.

I especially feel creativity is important as an aid to working through grief. I am an artist and you can mostly reach someone through pictures or music. There is a way of connecting worlds which sometimes doesn't happen with words. It can be a way of finding common ground. I have done some 'Healing Workshops' with Trudy in the far west and have used clay to help people access what they are dealing with.

What next ...?

We have a training night once a month for people to learn more about being a volunteer. We combine a meeting with a meal and are building a close knit team which is very supportive of each other. The centre is becoming a place where people feel they can drop in for a chat and a cup of tea. People say the house has a lovely feel, that it is a safe and inviting place. We hope to build on that this year. We had a stall at the Health and Fitness Expo held at Mudgee in March and plan to have a stall at the local markets just to let people know who we are and what we do. It is very satisfying work and a great way to spend 'retirement'.



NALAG Centre Mudgee Volunteers at the official opening.