

The Psychological Impact on Family Members of a Loved One Missing in Action (MIA)

Note: I consulted several sources for this paper, links to which are listed at the end.

Disappearance of a loved one is a unique type of loss, characterized in the psychological community as “ambiguous loss” or “unconfirmed loss.” Ambiguous loss defies resolution and creates confused perceptions about who is in or out of a particular family. An unconfirmed loss is acknowledged as the most stressful type of loss, more so even than the death of a loved one.

Thousands of people worldwide each year are affected by disappearances of their loved ones, especially in the context of war and/or state terrorism, or the acts of cruelty conducted by a state against its own people. Unnatural, sudden, and violent losses, such as homicide and suicide, are associated with increased risk of psychopathologies. Studies involving persons missing in action (MIA), and comparable disappearances due to war or state terrorism, show that some survivors of this type of loss suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and a condition known as complicated grief disorder (CGD), an atypical grief response that occurs only in a minority of the bereaved population. Psychologists identify CGD sufferers as those unable to resume normal activities beyond six months of bereavement, the time period demonstrated by research that most people are able to integrate bereavement into their lives. Symptoms of complicated grief include maladaptive thoughts and behaviors related to the death or the deceased, continuous mood swings, social isolation, and thoughts of suicide.

It’s no surprise that, of the Keller family members, Kate exhibits more symptoms, as women prove significantly more stressed, depressed, and anxious than men over a war- or state terrorism-related disappearance. Age is a factor, too: studies from 2014 show that older relatives become significantly more distressed than younger ones. Kinship is another factor: recent studies also confirm that women with a missing son experienced significantly higher levels of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and sleep dysfunction compared to women with a missing husband, brother, or father. Another study reveals that spouses and parents of missing persons seem to be the most affected compared to siblings.

Neither age nor gender alone, however, contribute to an increase in PTSD or CGD.

Results of recent studies of the association between time since disappearance and psychopathology also parallel the Keller family dynamics. Grief diminishes for most people by the time they have reached the third year of loss, as it seems to have done for Joe and Chris. It hasn’t for Kate. Early in the play, Chris tells Joe that he observed Kate wandering around and weeping in the early morning hours that day. Joe says: “She’s dreaming about him again. She’s walking around at night ... She’s getting just like after he died,” indicating that Kate’s grief has surpassed the three-year mark, and has tragically returned to the most excessive levels of the initial months of loss. She is demonstrating depression, anxiety and disturbed sleep.

Chris and Joe also talk about having done Kate a disservice by allowing her to believe they

too think that Larry may still be alive. Studies prove that holding on to hope for the return of the missing loved one, which some people consider positive, actually contributes to higher levels of CGD. Chris seems to understand that, although his father doesn't. They discuss it in this passage, which also shows a family dynamic that contributes to Kate's--and Joe's to a lesser degree--difficulty in coping with Larry's death:

Chris: ... I know one thing, Dad. We've made a terrible mistake with Mother.
Keller: What?
Chris: Being dishonest with her. That kind of thing always pays off, and now it's paying off.
Keller: What do you mean, dishonest?
Chris: You know Larry's not coming back and I know it. Why do we allow her to go on thinking that we believe with her?
Keller: What do you want to do, argue with her?
Chris: I don't want to argue with her, but it's time she realized that nobody believes Larry is alive any more. (KELLER *simply moves away, thinking, looking at the ground.*) Why shouldn't she dream of him, walk the nights waiting for him? Do we contradict her? Do we say straight out that we have no hope any more? That we haven't had any hope for years now?
Keller: (*Frightened at the thought.*) You can't say that to her.
Chris: We've got to say it to her.
Keller: How're you going to prove it? Can you prove it?
Chris: For God's sake, three years! Nobody comes back after three years. It's insane.
Keller: To you it is, and to me. But not to her. You can talk yourself blue in the face, but there's no body and no grave, so where are you?

Some aspects of family functioning can contribute to how well they will get through the disappearance. Families that have clear and straightforward standards and rules of behavior, and function cooperatively, are able to manage the stress of the disappearance more favorably. If, as a family, they view themselves as active in managing challenging situations and in control over dealing with these situations, they will experience less stress, CGD, PTSD, and anxiety.

The exchange between Chris and Joe shows that they made an implicit promise to one another to pretend Larry was alive to protect Kate from further grief. Though it was ultimately self-defeating, it showed that that the family was capable of functioning cooperatively--that they had one another's backs and were willing to lie if they felt it helped a family member--which can be a healthy thing. An additional implicit promise has been made by Joe and Kate: to keep Joe's wrongdoings from Chris. It's another cooperative function, showing that they have one another's backs, but it prolongs a situation that continues to eat away at the couple, and keeps them always guarded and wary.

The coping strategies that an individual develops around an ambiguous or unconfirmed loss can either aid their psychological adjustment or prolong their psychopathology. A 2014 study showed that greater use of emotion-focused coping strategies--seeking sympathy from others, for example--was associated with increased levels of depression,

anxiety, and stress. In contrast, greater use of problem-focused coping strategies, or devising ways to dealing with the problem, was associated with decreased levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Planting the apple tree in Larry's memory was closure for Joe and Chris, but not for Kate, who resented it because it felt like a memorial. It could be read by the outside world that Larry was dead. Each neighbor who comes by the morning after it's knocked over worries how Kate will take it. Their concern makes it clear that she has kept her belief in Larry's survival in the forefront of her interactions with people, and that she elicits sympathy from others for her plight as a mother with a son who's MIA. It also deflects attention away from Joe's misdeed, and makes him sympathetic, too.

Ann, who knows that Larry is dead, has not had to deal with ambiguous loss. Therefore, she has not had to bear the burden of lack of resolution. As a result, she appears to have moved on more decisively; she tells Chris that she "almost got married two years ago". When Kate insists that Ann is still waiting for Larry to return, Ann is adamant that she is not, that she has moved on.

Chris was probably the next to move on, telling his mother, "I've let him go. I've let him go a long [time ago]," and writing to Ann a year and a half after Larry is MIA. Statistically, as a brother, he would have been less affected than his parents, but research has indicated that relatives who are exposed to other traumatic events will be more susceptible to prolonged and increased symptoms. By the same token, Joe's arrest, imprisonment and criminal trials give him added stressors. As the father, he would have more emotional trauma around his missing son, but he is coping far better than his wife. His nap-taking seems to be an effective coping mechanism.

The studies I consulted, most of which were done only in the last three to five years, acknowledge a need for more research on the underexplored, yet pertinent issue of suffering caused by the disappearance of a significant loved one due to war and state terrorism. Nonetheless, the characters that Arthur Miller drew 70 years ago uncannily and precisely duplicate the phases of grief and family dynamic related to the impact of such a unique loss. It's a testimony to Miller's authentic observation of human nature.

Sources and further reading:

<http://www.deathreference.com/Me-Nu/Missing-in-Action.html>

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1524838017699602>

<http://www.copyrightencyclopedia.com/patterns-of-grief-reactions-in-the-families-of-the/>

<http://www.angelfire.com/biz/odochartaigh/resilience.html>