

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

DEALING WITH FROZEN GRIEF



For this mother of a missing son,
time has come to a standstill.

While it is very painful to contend with the tragic loss of a loved one, most people develop their own coping mechanisms to deal with the grief caused by death. However, what happens when a loved one goes missing and there is no news for years? The uncertainty surrounding the disappearance of a loved one leaves families in limbo, unable to mourn and caught between constant hope and despair. Many family members of missing persons do not stop searching for answers and keep waiting for some news while struggling to cope with the ambiguity of their loss. This state of uncertainty, marked by the lack of facts surrounding the loss of a loved one, is referred to as “ambiguous loss”.

UNDERSTANDING AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Ambiguous loss, which is sometimes also referred to as frozen grief, describes the debilitating impact of losing a family member and not knowing their fate and whereabouts. Unlike death, this loss does not allow opportunities for closure and resolution, which freezes the process of grieving.

As this often leaves the affected families feeling helpless, hopeless and exhausted, it has been described as “the most distressful of all losses”.¹ Despite the severity of the condition, ambiguous loss remains largely unacknowledged in most societies, including in Sri Lanka.

Around the world, hundreds of thousands of people are reported missing or separated from their families because of armed conflict, other violence, disasters, humanitarian emergencies or migration.

¹ P. Boss, Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss, W. W. Norton & Co, New York, NY, 2006.

TYPES OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Physically absent, psychologically present

This is when a loved one is physically absent under unknown, uncertain or unresolved circumstances.

Without an opportunity to grieve over/lay to rest the recovered remains of their loved ones or facts to clarify what happened, people with missing family members feel that their loved one is psychologically present although they are physically absent, making it difficult to cope emotionally. Instead of moving forward in life, families put decisions on hold and remain frozen in time. For example, families may continue to prepare food for the missing person.

At its core, ambiguous loss is about a lack of resolution as it leaves the family without closure, causing intense suffering and confusion.

Sometimes I cannot bear the pain, especially around the date that my sister disappeared. When I see girls in town or at the temple, I walk over to check if my sister is among them... This is all that I think about. It's a life of not knowing.

sister of a missing person

Physically present, psychologically absent

This occurs when a person is physically present but psychologically absent because of severe depression, addiction or impairments caused by dementia or a traumatic brain injury.

Unlike natural death, family members of people suffering from these conditions live in intense uncertainty about whether their family member is present or absent. Offering no possibility of closure, this kind of uncertainty is especially hard to recognize, make sense of and grieve through (Boss, 2019).

Seeing my mother battling with severe dementia breaks my heart. It is like the loving and nurturing mother that I have known all my life is no more there, yet she is there.

son of a dementia patient

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR SRI LANKA?

The humanitarian tragedy of missing persons has affected people across all communities in Sri Lanka, leading them to live with ambiguous loss.

The armed conflict, political unrest, civil disturbances, natural disasters (such as tsunami) and migration (such as via sea routes) have led to many people going missing.

I have forgotten how to smile since my son's disappearance.

mother of a missing person

We think about him all the time – when we eat or serve rice for ourselves, he is on our minds.

father of a missing person

Although the exact number of missing persons in Sri Lanka is unknown, as of 2024, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) continues to follow-up 15,000 cases of missing persons (strictly related to past armed conflict).

According to the ICRC's Family Needs Assessment,² most families of the missing in Sri Lanka continue to live in a state of ambiguity, uncertain if their loved one is alive or dead. Even those who think that their missing loved ones may have died, still need information on what happened to their loved ones and their whereabouts.



² [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\), Living With Uncertainty: Needs of the Families of Missing Persons in Sri Lanka, 0133/002, ICRC, Sri Lanka, July 2016.](#)



A doctor's notebook
A daughter holds on to
memories of her missing father.



The mother of a missing son recalls the last time she saw him.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

It affects individuals, families, communities, and broader society in multiple ways.

IMPACT ON THE INDIVIDUAL

Heightened emotional stress

Family members of a missing person may feel that their thinking and decision-making capacity is suspended; they may be constantly on alert and feel extremely anxious and depressed. Some may experience anger towards oneself or others, addiction, major depression, feelings of guilt, medically unexplained physical pains or suicidal thoughts.

Stigma and safety concerns

With over 80 per cent of missing persons being male, single mothers who lead families in traditional communities suffer from gender related stigma, even among their closest family members, and are often exposed to security risks.³

3 [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\), Living With Uncertainty: Needs of the Families of Missing Persons in Sri Lanka, 0133/002, ICRC, Sri Lanka, July 2016.](#)

IMPACT ON FAMILY

Isolation

Families of missing people often suffer in silence because of the lack of recognition of their uncertain situation by the community. Friends, neighbors and extended family may not always understand the complex feelings of the families suffering from ambiguous loss. They may not know how to comfort grieving families in such circumstances, often leaving families to fend for themselves and cope in isolation.

Strained relationships

There can also be disagreements among family members about what happened to the missing person, leading to permanent rifts and separation.

Additionally, surviving family members may feel neglected or sidelined owing to the preoccupation with the missing loved one.

I have not received support over the years. Our house does not even have a toilet... I do manual labour and care for my grandchildren who don't have their mother.

mother of a missing person



Parents cherish the last remaining belongings of a missing son.

Lack of closure without rituals

While death is traditionally marked by mourning rituals which mobilize the community and provide social support, there are no specific religious rituals to recognize and address the suffering of the families of missing people. While it is natural for human beings to grieve loss and find meaning in their suffering, however, the lack of rituals to mark ambiguous loss stalls the grieving process and makes family members feel trapped in time.

Search for answers continuing over generations

One of the most distinctive aspects of the experience of many families of missing people is that the need to find answers passes down from one generation to the next. The unending despair of not knowing

what happened to their loved ones continues to shape family history and identity.

Economic insecurity

While families cope with ambiguous loss, they also experience economic insecurity, poverty, legal and administrative challenges. As the missing person is often the breadwinner of the family, families are left with reduced or no income. Moreover, families cannot access the assets belonging to the missing person because of lack of acceptable documentation such as a certificate of absence or death certificate. Children particularly suffer in such situations, sometimes being required to supplement the family's income at the cost of pursuing education.

IMPACT ON LARGER COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

Polarized communities

Since a missing person belongs to an ethnic, religious and political community, the impact of their disappearance can also affect entire communities. It can harm social cohesion, peace and reconciliation initiatives in the long term.

When discussing reconciliation in many contexts, the issue of missing persons is often one of the most pressing concerns raised by affected families and the wider society. It is a legacy of conflict which, if not acknowledged and addressed, can perpetuate grievances and further polarize communities long after the conflict

and violence have ended, even becoming a catalyst for further violence. Individuals and communities experiencing trauma as a result of their unresolved grief, are less likely to move past feelings of fear and mistrust to empathize with the other side.

Enable dialogue

Families of the missing can also be at the forefront of forging dialogue between different parties to a conflict. In a quest to find answers about their own missing relatives, families may be willing to reach out to the other side, and in the process, forge mutual acknowledgement of each other's sufferings and rebuild trust.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

While there are many professionals with extensive experience in dealing with trauma and counselling, the concerns of the families of missing persons are rarely addressed within the scope of mental health or psychosocial issues. To help the number of people in Sri Lanka and across the world affected by ambiguous loss, it is important to raise awareness and understanding about the issue. This will in turn help people become more empathetic towards community members experiencing such loss.

Mental health and psychosocial practitioners

Mental health and psychosocial practitioners can help recognize the uncertainty and fear of not knowing what happened to their missing loved ones, instead of encouraging individuals and families to accept that their loved ones may not be alive. Mental health practitioners could acknowledge the complex emotions experienced by the individual and refer them to further support, if needed.

Family, peers and community

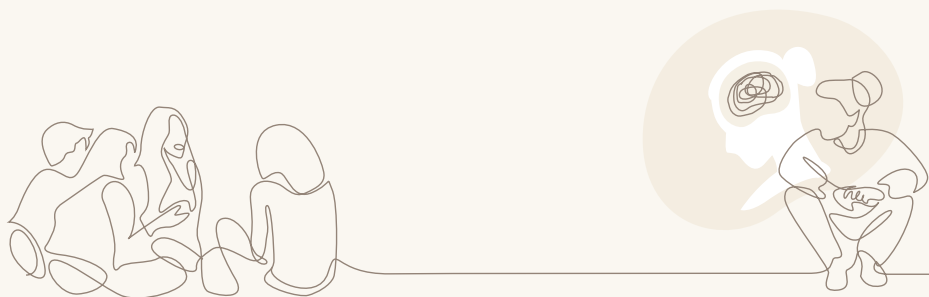
Family members, peers and community members should acknowledge and respect the complex emotions experienced by the individuals and refer them to further support, if needed.

Civil society

Civil society organizations, NGOs and local organizations can raise awareness regarding ambiguous loss in the communities they work with and implement programmes that address the psychological, socio-economic, legal, and administrative needs of families of missing people, including the need for recognition.

Authorities

To end the anguish and uncertainty of families who live in a state of ambiguity, authorities must acknowledge their suffering and take necessary action to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons and provide recognition.





Preserved memories. Tangible reminders of a missing son provide comfort to his aging parents.

THE ICRC'S WORK ON AMBIGUOUS LOSS

I used to think that I am the only one who had lost someone without any news of their whereabouts, but through the ICRC's programme, I realized that there are many other families who have also lost loved ones. Only other families of missing people can understand how much agony we undergo. I am much stronger now.

mother of a missing person

Based on an extensive Family Needs Assessment conducted in 2014–2015 in Sri Lanka,⁴ the ICRC's Accompaniment Programme was designed to provide mental health and psychosocial support for families of missing people.

Working through local organizations from 2015 to 2024, we reached over 10,000 family members of missing people in Sri Lanka to help them cope with the uncertainty and ambiguous loss. Peer support groups were created for families, which were facilitated by trained and supervised companions.

The companions were mostly people who have experience of a similar situation and can help families dealing with difficulties related to the disappearance of their loved ones by providing empathetic support.

The programme created a forum for families to share, process their difficult emotions and address the need for recognition through memorialization of missing persons in their communities with activities of their choice. The ICRC has also been raising awareness among academia, students and practitioners of mental health and psychosocial support in Sri Lanka.

[We] engraved the names of missing people on a board in the village school. Seeing that board brings me joy.

a family member
of a missing person

4 [International Review of the Red Cross. \(2019\). Families of the missing: Psychosocial effects and therapeutic approaches. Retrieved from](#)



Eternally bound

The wife of a missing person
reminisces about happier times.



The last letter

A wife with a letter from
her missing husband.



ICRC




Amidst their emotional struggles, families of missing persons continue to search for their missing loved ones. National Conference for Families of Missing Persons 2024 – facilitated by the ICRC.

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

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