

Hope in the Liminal Space



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Each year in Australia 35,000 people are reported missing to law enforcement agencies (James, Anderson, & Putt, 2008). When a person is missing those who are left behind exist in a space between the person being both here and gone (Boss, 1999). Within this space, a sense of ambiguous loss is punctuated by feelings of hope. Given the lack of certainty surrounding the permanency of the loss and the absence of the customary markers of grief, those left behind “engage the future in an extended or suspended present” (Hogben, 2006, p. 333). A study currently being undertaken by the author seeks to deconstruct hope and its dual role in being attached to the relational bond with the missing person, as well as the individual’s capacity to exist in a space where hope and despair shift on a fluctuating basis, known as a “liminal space”.

Within a liminal space, hope may be a tool to assist in a person’s capacity to survive the unknown – the presence and absence of a person. Boss (1999) and Edkins (2011) describe hope as a logical emotion attached to the action of having a loved one missing. The inclusion of hope across multiple research studies reinforces the existence of a “desire to maintain hope that the person will return” (Waring, 2001, p. 12).

This desire for the person returning may fluctuate with a sense of needing to come to terms with nonreturn. Worden (2008), Neimeyer (2010) Cutcliffe (1998), Nekolaichuk, Jevne and Maguire, (1999) and Perselz (1999) refer to hope in a bereavement context as an outward expression in response to the ways in which an individual may be surviving the loss they are living with. The role of hope is known to exist both in the research-based narratives of the individuals as well as in the counselling space in exploring a new world without the person who was lost (Lester, 1995). The literature identifies that hope signified an engagement with the possibility of a future postloss, as well as an indicator that a person was beginning to survive their loss by being hopeful for the future. The role of hope in the process of loss is linked in the literature by reference to its “re-emergence” (noted in both Cutcliffe, 1998; Ai, Cascio, & Evans-Campbell, 2005) at some point following the loss or death of a loved one. The timing of its re-emergence has not yet been explored in depth.

The current study is grounded in the stories of people left behind when someone they loved went missing. A preliminary thematic analysis of the data reveals a complex web of both hope and despair as a reaction to an ambiguous loss. Here, hope does not appear to re-emerge; its existence is noted in conjunction with the initial loss, differing from that in bereavement through death. Yet the conceptualisation of hope changes over

time and its persistence can be viewed as both negative and positive in terms of a person’s capacity to live with the unknown. Deeper analysis is being undertaken to better understand the role hope plays within an ambiguous loss, such as when a person is missing.

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