

Between hope and despair

**Study on the stress factors and psychosocial needs
of the family members of missing persons**



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Das Schweizerische Rote Kreuz (SRK) engagiert sich seit vielen Jahren in der Grundlagen- und Projektarbeit in den Bereichen Gesundheit, Migration und Integration.

«Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out»

Václav Havel


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Preface

The problems associated with the search for missing persons is something that I became aware of at a very early age. My godfather worked in Germany and Austria for a few years in the aftermath of the Second World War, dealing directly with issues relating to the return of prisoners of war, refugees and displaced persons. He used to stay with us during his trips home. For years, his work was an impressive topic of discussion at the lunch table and in conversations.

Another tragedy occurred when I was just twelve years old: a close friend of mine who lived in our neighbourhood who was around 15 years old suddenly went missing. Everybody was extremely concerned, including my classmates. Thankfully, she was found safe and well after a few days.

I have of course dealt with missing persons and persons who have vanished in the 35 years in which I worked in humanitarian aid and at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. During this time, I often had to deal with the consequences of war and disasters. This means that I can relate very closely to issues relating to missing persons in general.

I remember so well the rescue campaign Switzerland carried out in San Salvador following the devastating earthquake of 1986 which I was in charge of. A father begged me to find his daughter who was buried under the rubble of a house and he knew exactly where to look. He begged me to do everything I could to find her and to save her. Two days later she was found in the exact spot he had pointed out. But sadly she was dead.

During the Balkan conflict I made frequent trips to the Balkan states and was confronted with the many unanswered questions of the family members of those who had gone missing: Where are they? What has happened to them? Have they been ..., are they...? Could you not, perhaps, please...?

A few days after the tsunami of December 2004, I travelled to Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand. I was approached by many people I did not know including representatives of public authorities, asking continuously if we could not help them to search for their missing loved ones. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation was heavily involved in the search for missing persons in the aftermath of

the tsunami, some of whom were Swiss nationals, and in identifying victims of the tsunami.

When I visited a women's prison in Libya, I met illegal immigrants who had been held there for months. They had no idea what was going to happen to them. A young woman told me with tears pouring down her face that she had fled Libya with her husband and son on a boat, hoping to reach France or Spain. She said that everyone on the boat had been tossed overboard just off the coast. She lost sight of her husband and son in the darkness and she never heard from them again. She said she keeps asking about them but nobody is giving her any information.

A female refugee from Somalia whom I spoke to in August 2011 is another person I will never forget. I met her at Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya where hundreds of thousands of people live. She had fled Somalia around four weeks before with her two sons, one aged six, the other aged

one. She was so weak from the lack of food and water and from walking that she had to leave her baby son at the side of the road one week before she reached the camp. She said she was too weak to carry him. She said she was now living in the hope that somebody would bring him to the camp. Yet she feared he was dead.

All these encounters and fates of people have made an indelible impression on me. It is difficult to fully grasp what the family members of missing loved ones have to go through and endure. This explains why I fully back the endeavours undertaken by the SRC Tracing Service to provide better support to these unfortunate people. This report is an important step in the right direction. I sincerely hope that the findings of this report will inspire not just the Swiss Red Cross but other institutions as well.

Toni Frisch

Swiss Red Cross

Member of the Red Cross Council

1. Introduction

The Tracing Service of the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) is available to all persons who are looking for missing relative or loved one¹. In the year 2011, the SRC Tracing Service received 556 new search requests. Around 50 percent of these requests were filed by persons residing in Switzerland, the remaining requests came from persons living in other countries. 49 percent of the search requests were submitted by persons who had lost contact with a loved one owing to conflicts and disasters, 24 percent owing to migration. 27 percent of the persons filing a search request had lost contact with their loved one for social reasons. The last category includes search requests owing to family-related events (adoption, family conflicts etc.) as well as loss of contact caused by Switzerland's social policy, indentured child labourers as well as victims of «administrative detention».

In the past four years, the personnel and working fields of the SRC Tracing Service have been expanded. Internal processes have been optimised and external public relations work has been carried out in order to raise awareness of the work performed by the SRC Tracing Service among interested parties. This has led to a relevant increase in the number of search requests filed. The head of the SRC Tracing Service has also intensified cooperation with organisations both at home and abroad. A networking and exchange platform has, for instance, been set up for organisations in Switzerland that are involved in the search for missing persons. Furthermore, the exchange with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other national Red Cross societies has been enhanced within the framework of the «Restoring Family Links» network.

Following this phase of consolidation, the plan is now to optimise the services that are currently available and in particular to expand psychosocial support² services for

¹ This study mainly refers to the «family members of missing persons». This applies to persons who would like to restore contact with a family member or loved one who has gone missing. The definition of the «family member of missing persons» is deliberately held rather vague; thus it covers all situations in which the SRC Tracing Service becomes involved. It does not specify whether the loss of contact is involuntary or not for the person who is missing.

² In this publication, «psychosocial support» is perceived as a broad spectrum of intervention and assistance geared towards helping persons with psychological and social problems to re-integrate into society and to cope with everyday life. The aim is to mobilise existing (inner and outer) resources and to strengthen their coping abilities.

clients. The staff of the SRC Tracing Service consistently face difficult and multiple stressful situations and have to deal with persons looking for missing loved ones who are in a very distressed frame of mind. The counsellors looking after them become important confidants and an important source of information. In doing so, they take on tasks that extend way beyond the normal call of duty. There is no specific counselling agency for the family members of missing persons in Switzerland or in any of its neighbouring countries or indeed qualified counsellors who are responsible for dealing with them. The SRC is therefore charting new territory in an area where there is a huge need that is hardly being addressed – at least not at European level.

Literature contains very few surveys on the psychosocial needs of the family members of missing persons and on suitable support measures. A review of literature conducted by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health in Australia has shown that although over 180 publications in relation to grief and loss were located, only five related specifically to the family members of missing persons³. The ICRC and individual national Red Cross societies did carry out a few surveys on the psychosocial needs of the family members of missing persons in the context of war or disasters⁴. However, this can only be transferred to the situation of the family members of

missing persons in Switzerland to a limited extent because the social context and reasons behind the loss of contact vary greatly.

This is what prompted the SRC Tracing Service to commission surveys itself. It was keen to gather or generate suitable knowledge and information on the basis of which it can develop its own psychosocial services and counselling. Two theses have already been written with this intention in mind. Corina Katamay-Neves conducted a search in literature for studies on the effects of involuntary loss of contact on the family members of missing persons and for theoretical concepts that could be beneficial for the expansion of psychosocial counselling provided by the Tracing Service⁵. Carolin Krauss carried out a survey on the experience gained by institutions providing psychiatric counselling and therapy working with the family members of missing persons⁶.

To complement these surveys, the SRC Tracing Service commissioned an exploratory study in 2012 on the psychosocial needs of its clients. In a survey conducted with persons directly affected, the aim was to gather initial findings on their condition and based on these findings to explore potential support measures. The survey was conducted by two employees of the SRC between January and August 2012.

³ Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001, p. 4.

⁴ Cf., for instance, ICRC, 2010; Bhawan & Baneshwor, 2009.

⁵ Katamay-Neves, 2010.

⁶ Krauss, 2011a.

The results of this study will be outlined in the following chapters and will be made accessible to interested professionals. In Chapter 2, existing literature on the subject of the family members of missing persons will be presented along with suitable approaches of psychosocial support. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the study. The following chapters outline the results of the interviews carried out with clients of the SRC Tracing Service, broken down into Effects and stress factors (Chapter 4), Resources (Chapter 5) and Needs (Chapter 6). Any information and comments are provided anonymously. The final chapter summarises the most important results and findings and develops recommendations for the expansion of psychosocial support services for the family members of missing persons based on these results and findings. They are aimed first and foremost at the SRC Tracing Service. However, they may also be of interest to other agencies and professionals dealing with the family members of missing persons.

The authors of this study would like to seize this opportunity to extend their sincere thanks to the clients of the SRC Tracing Service involved in the survey. It was not easy for many of them to talk about the difficult situations they have faced and the implications this has had on many aspects of their lives. Their openness and willingness to talk about their experience within this study will help to cater more effectively for the needs of the family members of missing persons in future.

2. Scientific basis

2.1. Surveys conducted on the family members of missing persons

This study deals with the family members of missing persons who have lost contact with a loved one involuntarily. The reasons behind this situation are manifold. However, one thing they all have in common is the huge, nagging uncertainty these family members face about what has happened to their missing loved one. Even years after a loved one has gone missing, the families are torn between hope that they will eventually be found and the need to put an end to the uncertainty even if this involves the worst possible outcome of learning that they are dead. This burden can seriously affect the physical and mental health of the family members of missing persons. A survey conducted on cases of missing persons reported to police in Australia showed that an average of twelve people are affected in some way by the disappearance of a loved one, be it health consequences, financial difficulties, or quality of life issues⁷. These include physical and emotional problems such as migraine, disturbed sleep, irritability and other stress-related symptoms. The disappearance of a family member or friend impacts on the work or business activities of the people

involved, with reports of work performance suffering due to concentration problems. Various studies also highlight the difficulties experienced with public authorities in dealing with legal issues. Involuntary loss of contact also leads to social isolation and troubled social relations both within the family and the person's circle of friends and acquaintances⁸.

In the study conducted by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, the following individual factors were identified that influence how people deal with involuntary loss of contact:

- The kinship with the missing person
- The nature of the attachment to the missing person
- The circumstances leading to the loss of contact
- Former experience and former way of coping with the loss of a loved one
- Personal characteristics such as gender, age and living conditions
- The social, cultural and religious environment
- Other stressful situations that exist simultaneously⁹

⁸ Cf., for instance, Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001; Bhawan & Baneshwor, 2009; Somasundaram, 2007.

⁹ Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001, p. 27 ff.

⁷ Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001, p. 13.

The ICRC has already conducted research into the situations and needs of the family members of missing persons outside Europe and continues to carry out research in this area. As a rule, these people lose contact with a loved one because of war or sometimes natural disasters, they have not fled to another country but continue to live in their community. In these settings, society as a whole is affected by the event leading to the loss of contact and there are hundreds of persons searching for missing loved ones. Some of them organise themselves collectively in order to enforce their rights and concerns. The needs analyses carried out by the ICRC in Nepal¹⁰ and Timor-Leste¹¹ highlighted above all social, material and legal needs. The main concern of the family members of missing persons interviewed in these studies is to find out what has happened to their missing loved ones and what the government was doing to shed light on the situation. When loss of contact was caused by war, in particular, the persons expressed the wish to have their missing loved ones commemorated by days of remembrance or memorials, with the families of missing persons being officially acknowledged. In addition to this acknowledgement, the persons with missing loved ones also demand that the government provide financial support. In conflict-ridden regions, it is mainly women whose husbands, the main bread winners of the family, have gone missing. The study conducted in Timor-Leste shows

that financial support for the family members of missing persons is a much more urgent need than psychosocial support. Clarifying the legal status of the family members of missing persons, for instance, in relation to their marital status or their entitlement to the personal belongings of their missing loved ones, is frequently mentioned in this context. Psychosocial needs are discussed above all in relation to the community. The study conducted on Nepal suggested that associations be set up to support the families of missing persons and that rituals be carried out to commemorate the missing persons. Furthermore, the study advocated implementing measures aimed at reintegrating persons stigmatised by events into the community. These include, for instance, wives whose marital status is unclear.

The needs analyses and the publications by the ICRC are directed above all at governments and public institutions. They are intended to raise awareness of the situation of the family members of missing persons and to implement concrete measures to enhance their social, legal and/or material situation. The outcomes of these needs analyses are most informative regarding the situation in the countries of origin of certain clients of the SRC Tracing Service. However, the recommendations on the provision of psychosocial support for the family members of missing persons that tend to refer to communities can only be transferred to the situation of the family members of missing persons in Switzerland to a limited extent.

¹⁰ Bhawan & Baneshwor, 2009.

¹¹ ICRC, 2010.

2.2. Psychosocial intervention strategies

Existing concepts outlined in specialist literature on grief therapy and grief counselling in general or complicated grief in particular are not suitable for cases involving involuntary loss of contact. They are usually based on a model involving different stages of grief¹², with the final phase culminating in the family members coping with and accepting the death of a loved one. However, this process is rendered impossible or is certainly greatly affected by the uncertainty the family members of missing persons face regarding the fate of their loved one. Strategies such as those used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder are not really adequate either as they tend to deal with a traumatic event that lies in the past. By contrast, the target group of this study has to cope with an on-going stressful situation, at least in relation to involuntary loss of contact.

In the following, we would like to present the work performed by two therapists who have dealt specifically with the situation of family members of missing loved ones in the context of Western Europe and non-European countries. Their interpretations and concepts promote understanding of the unique situations the family members of missing persons face and make concrete recommendations for the psychosocial support they need.

The phase model developed by Barbara Preitler

Dr. Barbara Preitler is a psychotherapist who deals with people looking for loved ones who have gone missing as a result of conflicts or for political reasons (dictatorships, war etc.). She describes the personal and social implications such situations have. She also outlines existing collective coping strategies, for instance, the activities the mothers of Plaza del Mayo engaged in Argentina or the exhumations in Guatemala¹³.

Using case histories from her work as a therapist, Preitler outlines how family members who fled to Austria reacted to involuntary loss of contact with a loved one and provides recommendations for therapeutic work. She also addresses the fears, *inter alia*, that prevent certain clients from filing a search request with the Austrian Red Cross. These people are torn between the fear of having to face a painful reality and the need to put an end to the uncertainty once and for all. Preitler also describes cases in which the missing person eventually turned up and considers the response of her clients and the effect this new situation had on their state of mind.

In 2005, Preitler was involved in the development of a training programme for psychosocial professionals in the wake of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. In this context and on the basis of the experience she gained working as a therapist in Austria, she

¹² For example, the phases of grief defined by E. Kübler-Ross or by T. A. Rando.

¹³ Cf. Preitler, 2006.

developed a phase model that describes how families learn to cope with the involuntary loss of a loved one¹⁴:

- *Phase 1, «Chaos and destruction»:* In the initial phase after a disaster, the vital needs of the person and the family members present need to be met. During this time, the persons concerned hope their missing loved one will eventually turn up.
- *Phase 2, «Search for the «missing person»»:* After they have overcome the initial shock and their most immediate needs have been met, family members actively begin searching for their missing loved ones.
- *Phase 3, «Caught between hope and despair»:* The family members of missing persons are neither willing nor able to give up the hope of finding the missing person. The tiniest piece of information about survivors is reason enough for them to continue the search. During this phase, the family members are not willing to consider the possibility that the missing person may be dead.
- *Phase 4, «Clinging to a glimmer of hope»:* Uncertainty about the fate of their loved ones and the search for missing persons represents a huge burden in financial, physical and emotional terms. The family members looking for missing loved ones feel they have been left in the lurch, they feel exhausted,

angry depressed and/or frantic. As long as it is not certain that their loved one has died, they are not willing to give up hope.

- *Phase 5, «Hidden grieving process»:* Months after the event leading to the loss of contact, families gradually begin to mourn the missing person. This is a complex and lengthy process because they are not sure whether the loss is going to be permanent. As such, it is also a matter of learning how to deal with the uncertainty and the ambiguous situation. During this phase, support from the people around them is extremely important in preventing feelings of guilt.

This phase model can be transferred to loss of contact for other reasons (such as war, conflict etc.) and to refugees who have fled their native country. The five phases frequently overlap and people do not necessarily go through them in the above-mentioned order.

Preitler developed guidelines for the provision of psychosocial support for the family members of missing persons in Sri Lanka¹⁵ based on this model. They involve continuous and intensive support that is intended to provide the family members of missing persons with some stability, security and new social contacts in a situation of complete chaos. In talks, the family members of missing persons can also be encouraged to mourn the events and the

¹⁴ Preitler, 2006, p. 92 ff.

¹⁵ Preitler, 2006, p. 95 ff.

missing person even if it remains unclear whether they are dead or alive. There is no need to deprive the family members of missing persons of the hope they sometimes cling to for years no matter how unrealistic this may seem. For this hope is sometimes the only thing giving the family members of missing persons the strength and motivation to cope with everyday life and to carry on with their lives. It is also recommended that therapists work with different members of a family all together in order to enhance communication that may have broken down between them, to develop new family structures and to redefine new roles. Performing rituals within families or communities can also help the family members of missing persons to grieve and to accept their loss without knowing whether or not it is definitive.

«Ambiguous loss» by Pauline Boss

Dr. Pauline Boss is a retired professor from the University of Minnesota and a family therapist. In the 1970s, she developed the concept of ambiguous loss in the work she did with the relatives of pilots who had gone missing in Vietnam and Cambodia¹⁶. Since then, she has implemented a large number of research projects in this area, applying the concept in practise and further developing it.

Boss describes two different types of ambiguous loss:

- The first situation refers to situations in which a person is *physically missing* but *psychologically present* because there is no certainty about what has happened to them. This applies, for instance, to persons who have vanished without a trace and to children who have been kidnapped. However, this kind of ambiguous loss can also refer to persons who experienced loss owing to divorce or adoption in which a parent or child is absent or has gone missing.
- The second type of ambiguous loss occurs when family members perceive a loved one as *physically present*, but *psychologically missing*. This happens, for instance, to people suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other mental or chronic illnesses that rob the mind. Ambiguous loss can, however, also be experienced by family members whose loved ones are totally preoccupied by their work or other matters, meaning they are perceived as being absent.¹⁷

The SRC Tracing Service encounters above all the first type of ambiguous loss with its clients which is why the main focus will be on this type of loss in the following. Both ambiguity and ambivalence can occur in situations of ambiguous loss¹⁸. Ambiguity applies to the cognitive or substantive level and describes the ambiguity of the situation. This happens, for instance, if it is not known whether the missing person is dead or alive. By contrast, ambivalence re-

¹⁶ Cf. Boss, 2000, p. 26.

¹⁷ Cf. Boss, 2000, p. 21.

¹⁸ Cf. Chapter 7 by Boss, 2008.

fers to the emotional level and describes the conflicting emotions people can experience simultaneously¹⁹, for instance, when family members of missing persons alternate between anger at the missing persons and grief over their loss. These conflicting emotions create feelings of guilt in the persons concerned who do not know how to deal with them. Both the ambiguity and the resulting ambivalence make it very difficult for them to function normally and to cope. This situation can lead to indecisiveness, stress, anxiety, depression, disturbed sleep and psychosomatic disorders.

Relationships also suffer from ambiguous loss, some actually become totally entrenched. Generally speaking, there are no rituals in place to mark ambiguous situations for which there is no closure in communities or society²⁰. The family members of missing persons receive neither the social recognition nor the social support people receive in cases of unambiguous death. The persons in the immediate surroundings of the family members of missing persons do not know how to respond to the ambiguous situation or how to behave towards the person (or indeed persons) affected by ambiguous loss. That is why ambiguous loss often leads to social isolation and marginalisation. Fami-

ly relationships become entrenched, communication is avoided, certain issues become taboo, family conflicts arise and relationships may break down altogether. Both types of ambiguous loss can occur in families. Mothers, for instance, can be so absorbed by the ambiguous loss of their husband that they are not really emotionally there for the other members of the family. This means that children suffer double the impact of ambiguous loss of both father and mother. «Family members can become so absorbed by the loss that they withdraw from each other. The family then becomes an empty structure.»²¹

Many of the symptoms that appear in persons facing ambiguous loss are similar to those that manifest themselves with post-traumatic stress disorder or complicated grief. Yet the causes and above all the appropriate intervention strategies differ greatly depending on the problems involved. Persons suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or complicated grief are unable to deal with a death or a traumatic event that lies in the past. With ambiguous loss, the stressful situation lasts indefinitely and the ambiguity of current circumstances blocks resources and the coping process. Ambiguous loss needs to be seen as a chronic trauma²² that weighs heavily on the persons concerned in the present. The ambivalent emotions people have are a «normal response to unclear situations and do not represent individual

¹⁹ Boss, 2008, p. 200.

²⁰ As mentioned in the foregoing, some contexts of war and disasters involving a large number of families of missing persons form an exception as rituals and coping strategies are gradually implemented on a societal level. Cf., for instance, the chapter on collective coping strategies in Preitler, 2006

²¹ Boss, 2000, p. 24. All the citations from German documents have been translated into English by the translator.

²² Boss, 2003, p. 458.

pathological grief»²³. Another way of putting it is: «The situation is sick, not the person»²⁴. Although this does not mean that these cases never involve individual pathologies, identifying the ambiguous nature of the situation means the response of the persons concerned is not automatically assessed as individual weakness.

There is a visible correlation between people's ability to deal with ambiguous situations and the desire they have to control and manage their lives. Particularly in the Western, rational world, people assume they can influence their lives and their surroundings and that they can find clear answers to any questions they may have. Problems are solved and dealt with so that people can take on new tasks and focus on other things. However, this idea of controllability, control and linearity is completely called into question in situations of ambiguous loss. If a situation remains unresolved, this has the potential to cause stress and anxiety. The fact that the family members of missing persons are unable to gain closure with an event, troubles them. As such, dealing with the ambiguity and lack of control is influenced by personal values, religious and spiritual beliefs and situations involving a loss that lies in the past. These factors can also vary from culture to culture. A study conducted on family members caring for patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease in an Indian tribe in North America showed that they have

an amazingly constructive way of dealing with ambiguous situations.²⁵ Their beliefs and spiritual convictions helped them to accept the situation even though they did not understand the meaning or reasons behind it. «The Anishinabe women were able to deal with this illness because they believe that life itself is a mystery that they should embrace and surrender themselves to voluntarily.»²⁶ In the group processes in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Pauline Boss also ascertained that many migrants who had experienced other situations involving ambiguous loss in the past (for instance, as a result of migration) had a higher tolerance for new situations involving ambiguous loss.

Specialists supporting persons affected by ambiguous loss should work with them at the cognitive and emotional level. In talks, it is possible to foster their understanding of the situation they are facing and the emotions this evokes. As such, it is important to make a distinction between the ambiguity involved and the ambivalence they feel. This enables the persons affected by ambiguous loss to better describe and understand that their emotions and anguish are a normal response to an unclear, ambiguous situation. It is possible to show them that ambivalence is part of everyday life which people encounter time and again during their lifetime – for instance, when children fly the nest, when people change jobs, divorce or become ill etc.

²³ Boss, 2008, p. 201.

²⁴ Personal notes on a presentation given by Boss at the ICRC in Geneva on 7 January 2011.

²⁵ Boss, 2000, p. 31 ff.

²⁶ Boss, 2000, p. 32.

The aim of psychological and psychosocial support for the family members of missing persons should by no means be to gain closure with the situation and to get over the loss. When families are given to understand that they should give up on their missing son and that they need to find closure with this loss, this can enhance their ambivalence, feelings of guilt and anguish: «With ambiguous loss, the more we press for closure, the more families resist»²⁷. Rather, the approach that is based on resilience is aimed at enabling the family members of missing persons to learn to accept ambiguity and the lack of closure in their lives: «Resilience is gained when people know that the ambivalence caused by ambiguous loss is normal and can be overcome.»²⁸ It is not a matter of finding closure with a stressful event but of accepting unanswered questions in relation to the current situation and of learning to live with the ambiguity.

The family members of missing persons need to deal with the fact that there are many things in life we cannot influence or decide and that it is not always possible to find explanations or answers to things we have experienced. It is a matter of recognising the fact that there can be no closure with a situation and that the uncertainty and ambiguity may possibly last a lifetime. «In this gradual process, the family members of missing persons learn to live with the possibility that the missing persons may eventually turn up or that the loss

may be permanent.»²⁹ With this so-called *both-and-thinking*³⁰ approach, different possibilities remain open and continue to be pursued. The family members of missing persons can, for instance, say: «I hope my husband will turn up one day. At the same time, I am forming new relationships». Alternatively: «I must move on and organize life without my son, but at the same time, I can hope and remember»³¹. This dialectical attitude allows them to tap new resources and to look to the future despite the ambivalent situation and the unanswered questions.

Relationships are badly affected by situations involving ambiguous loss although they simultaneously harbour important resources for the family members of missing persons. That is why intervention at the level of relationships and community is essential in therapy for the family members of missing persons. Furthermore, the family members of missing persons tend to be more open to participating in intervention in family or community settings whereas they tend to be much more critical of individual therapy³².

Family-centred or community-based approaches should aim to restore troubled relationships and build new relationships. In talks, roles that have become entrenched because of the situation and communication in families or communities can be revived and redefined. The

²⁷ Boss, 2004, p. 561.

²⁸ Boss, 2008, p. 196.

²⁹ Boss, 2008, p. 221.

³⁰ Boss, 2008, p. 135.

³¹ Boss, 2004, p. 559

³² Boss, 2008, p. 2.

exchange in groups or within the family allows the ambivalence to be articulated and recognised. Moreover, different emotions, coping mechanisms and needs in relation to the situation of ambiguous loss can be discussed and considered. Sharing their stories can help the family members of missing persons to find new meaning in the situation as well as new hope. This strengthens individual resources and restores social bonds. Sharing their experience with other people can help family members of missing persons to build a new family of their choice (a psychological family) which gives both meaning and security. Several mothers who had lost their husbands in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, decided during an exchange workshop, for instance, to share apartments to save rent and child-care costs³³.

Like Preitler, Boss refers to the importance of rituals³⁴. Rituals allow people to bid a symbolic farewell to the past, to gain acknowledgement of the community for the situation they are in and to strengthen social ties. Memorial services, for instance, are extremely important in the wake of natural disasters or man-made disasters. As such, public authorities and religious leaders are expected to show a certain degree of flexibility and open-mindedness. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Mayor of New York City, for instance, allowed «presumed dead» certificates to be issued to the families of missing persons. Some religious leaders bent the rules, allowing

families to have funerals without a body or coffins filled with symbolic objects. Families who had lost a loved one in 9/11 implemented a large number of rituals and activities that promote the grief and coping process assisted by grief counselors. As such, each individual and family was encouraged to decide which way they wished to express their grief and cope with their situation.³⁵

³³ Boss, 2004, p. 557.

³⁴ Cf., for instance Boss, 2008, p. 156 and 239.

³⁵ Cf. Boss, 2003.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objectives and questions

The main objective of this study was to obtain new information about the situation and needs of the family members of missing persons living in Switzerland in order to derive measures and activities that will enhance support services for these persons. The focus was to be placed on psychosocial support services and less so on therapeutic work involving psychologists or psychotherapists.

The findings were intended to be beneficial to the SRC Tracing Service and other organisations and institutions dealing with the family members of missing persons in the European context and to be the subject matter of joint consideration.

The following research objectives were defined in the study concept:

- Examine the impact involuntary loss of contact has on the family members of missing persons, specifically in terms of emotional, social, health and economic consequences
 - Explore coping mechanisms and resources of the family members of missing persons
 - Gather information on the needs of the family members of missing persons in relation to psychosocial support
- The following questions were then derived for the study:
- How do the family members of missing persons experience their situation?
 - What impact does involuntary loss of contact have in terms of emotional, social, health and economic consequences?
 - What resources and coping mechanisms are available to the family members of missing persons that can help them to live with the stressful situation?
 - What needs do the family members of missing persons have in relation to improving their situation and living circumstances?
 - What (psychosocial) support services or measures are needed to strengthen their resources and to enhance their well-being?

3.2. Approach adopted

The research questions were examined in a survey conducted with directly affected persons. Their subjective opinions on the impact of involuntary loss of contact, resources available and support possibilities were chosen as the subject matter of the study. Owing to the complex life stories and stressful situations of the family members of missing persons on the one hand and the objectives of the study on the other, it seemed the most appropriate to adopt a quality-based approach involving individual and group interviews.

Between February and May 2012, a total of 16 semi-standardised guideline interviews were conducted with actual clients of the SRC Tracing Service. Based on open-ended questions, they were asked to talk about their situation, potential resources and needs.

The interviews were recorded and the content was transcribed verbatim³⁶ and was categorised, condensed and evaluated based on the qualitative content analysis using the Mayring method³⁷.

After these individual interviews, two group interviews were conducted with a total of seven former clients of the SRC Tracing Service whose missing loved one had been found alive. The aim of these

interviews was to reflect upon the results of the individual interviews and to obtain further information and suggestions on the research questions. The participants were asked to recall how they had felt during the search for their loved ones and what had or would have helped them to cope better with the stressful situation. During these interviews, they were also given the space to consider the burdens and needs of their current situation, in other words, after the missing person had been found alive. However, these issues could only be dealt with as marginal issues within the framework of this study and could certainly be the subject matter of further surveys and studies³⁸.

The group interviews were also recorded, transcribed and were evaluated according to Mayring.

3.3. Selection of samples

The profile of all clients of the SRC Tracing Service is very heterogeneous. It differs in relation to the reason for loss of contact as well as origin, age, gender and numerous other features. The decision was taken not to greatly limit the samples in the interest of conducting an exploratory survey that was intended to provide the broadest possible information and results and to include as many situations as possible. Rather, the aim was to compile the survey based on the principle of maximum varia

³⁶ With the exception of two individual interviews during which notes were taken because the interviewees did not want the interview to be recorded.

³⁷ Cf. Mayring, 2010.

³⁸ Cf. Chapter 7.2.

tion spectrum without claiming to be representative.

Notwithstanding this, certain boundaries were set and criteria defined to give the survey a more simple structure.

Individual interviews

Interviews were carried out with persons residing in Switzerland whose search request for a missing loved one (in Switzerland or another country) filed with the SRC Tracing Service was still ongoing. To enable the persons interviewed to explain what impact the loss of contact with a loved one was having on their lives, the loss of contact had to have occurred at least two years previously.

The samples were divided into the following two research groups:

- I. *Loss of contact for social or family-related reasons:* This group included search requests involving loss of contact owing to family conflicts, the search for biological parents, children surrendered for adoption or victims of administrative detention.
- II. *Loss of contact owing to migration or flight:* This group comprised search requests for persons who went missing as a result of political conflicts, wars, separation on the migration route or owing to migration.

It was ensured that in both groups persons were selected who had lost contact with a) a child, b) a brother, sister or husband c) their father or mother. In all other respects, the aim was to create a heterogeneous range of characteristic categories, for instance, in relation to gender, age, origin, current place of residence and reason for the loss of contact within the research group.

The counsellors at the SRC Tracing Service selected potential interviewees. The authors of this study then contacted them. The size of the sample was determined by the resources available but also by the willingness of the family members of missing loved ones to take part in this kind of interview in the first place. The following samples were chosen:

Sample of the group «Social or family-related reasons»

Gender	Canton of residence	Age	Person missing	Reason for loss of contact
F	Zürich	30–40	Father	Search for biological mother or father
F	Schaffhausen	40–50	Father	Search for biological mother or father
F	Lucerne	50–60	Father	Search for biological mother or father
M	Zürich	40–50	Brother or sister and father	Search for biological mother or father
F	Lucerne	40–50	Brother or sister	Search for social reasons
M	Zürich	70–80	Brother or sister	Search for social reasons
F	Tessin	60–70	Child	Search for social reasons
M	Berne	70–80	Child	Search for social reasons

Sample of the group «Migrants or refugees»

Gender	Canton of residence	Origin	Age	Person missing	Reason for loss of contact
F	Berne	Eritrea	20–30	Parents, brothers and sisters	War or conflicts
M	Wallis	Afghanistan	30–40	Parents, brothers and sisters	War or conflicts
F	Berne	Angola	40–50	Brother or sister	War or conflicts

Sample of the group «Migrants or refugees» (continuation)

M	Berne	Algeria	40–50	Brother or sister	Migration
M	Lucerne	Togo	30–40	Child and wife	War or conflicts
M	Bern	Sri Lanka	50–60	Child	War or conflicts
F	Zürich	Democratic Republic of the Kongo	50–60	Child	War or conflicts
F	Appenzell Ausserrhoden	Argentina	60–70	Child	War or conflicts

The persons selected for the group «Social or family-related reasons» were either Swiss nationals and/or persons with a migration background who had grown up in Switzerland. With the second group, the different regions and cultures of origin presented an additional challenge and level of variation. In order to reflect this diversity, aspects of transcultural competencies were taken into account when the guidelines were developed and the interviews were conducted. Transcultural competence involves developing «transcultural communication skills in the context of migration»³⁹ extending beyond cultural and ethnic aspects.⁴⁰

An interpreter was only needed in one case in the group «Migrants or refugees». All other persons interviewed were able to communicate fluently in French or German.

³⁹ Domenig, 2007, p. 174.

⁴⁰ For more information, please see *ibidem* and Kruse, 2009.

Group interviews

In order to reflect upon and supplement the results of the individual interviews, two group interviews were conducted with three to four persons whose missing loved one had been found alive. As such, the two research groups defined for the individual interviews were reused and one interview was conducted with representatives of each group. Only family members were chosen whose missing loved one (or a close relative of theirs⁴¹) had been found alive regardless of whether they had been found by the SRC Tracing Service or through another channel.

The interview with the group «Social or family-related reasons» was held in Berne. The profile of the participants was as follows:

Gender	Canton of residence	Age	Person missing	Reason for loss of contact
F	Berne	20–30	Father	Search for biological mother or father
F	Berne	50–60	Mother	Search for biological mother or father
M	Berne	40–50	Brother or sister	Search for social reasons
F	Graubünden	60–70	Son	Search for social reasons

The interview with the group «Migrants or refugees» was held in Zürich and was conducted in German without an interpreter. The following persons were represented:

Gender	Canton of residence	Origin	Age	Person missing	Reason for loss of contact
F	St. Gallen	Rwanda	30–40	Children and spouse	War or conflicts
F	Solothurn	Eritrea	30–40	Spouse	War or conflicts
F	St. Gallen	Slowenia	60–70	Brother or sister	Migration

⁴¹ One person had filed a search request for her father. It transpired that he was already deceased. However, the SRC Tracing Service did manage to establish a contact with her uncle.

3.4. Challenges and boundaries

Sample

Involuntary loss of contact with a loved one is an extremely stressful event that has a devastating effect on the persons concerned regardless of the reasons involved. This was also reflected in the search for interviewees. Participation was voluntary and could be revoked at any time. 30 to 50 percent of the persons asked to participate in the interviews ended up declining to do so. They said they found the topic too distressing or difficult. This also applies to persons asked to participate in the group interviews whose missing loved ones had been found but who continued to find the current situation very stressful. However, other people happily agreed to participate. They were glad to be able to do something in return for the support they had received from the SRC Tracing Service. The definitive compilation of the samples was therefore influenced to some extent by the willingness of people to participate in the interviews. A further challenge in relation to the group interviews was to find persons who lived in relative geographical proximity, who spoke the same language and were willing to talk about their experience in a group setting. This is perhaps one reason why it took longer to find participants for the group interviews than originally anticipated. Whereas it was originally planned that five to six persons would be interviewed in each group, the interviews ended up being conducted with just three or four participants.

Some interview participants were very distressed by their experience so that it was difficult for them to ponder their situation and to think about existing or possible resources. The group «Migrants or refugees» in particular was characterised by several stressful situations and painful experiences, hence the involuntary loss of contact was just one of the challenges facing them in their present lives. They also faced difficulties and burdens associated with the reason they migrated (violence, flight, disasters) and their migration experience as well as with social isolation and their precarious (residence) situation in Switzerland. As the boundaries between the various reasons and consequences can hardly be distinguished, it was not possible to establish in this study which stressful situations and consequences are to be attributed (solely) to the loss of contact of a loved one. The survey of burdens and resources in the group «Migrants or refugees» must therefore be seen in the context of all their experience and current situations in Switzerland. It must also be borne in mind that the majority of participants were not able to communicate in their mother tongue. However, it can be assumed that in the one translated interview a certain amount of information and nuances may also have been lost.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to provide the SRC Tracing Service with a basis for its future work. It had to be carried out within the scope of possibilities of the applied research performed by a relief organisa-

tion. Although the samples were relatively small, as mentioned above, a deliberate attempt was made to include different persons and situations. This explains why the 23 interviewed family members of missing persons have a very heterogeneous profile. Because of this diversity, it is not possible to generalise their statements or to evaluate them according to certain characteristics of the participants in the study (e.g. origin, kinship with the missing person, duration of the search or gender). No quantification was conducted in this study either. With certain statements, it has merely been specified for information purposes whether they apply to the majority of participants or merely to individuals.

We wish to call to mind once again at this point that the subjective assessment of the persons interviewed in relation to the issues defined at the beginning are the subject matter of this study. The results presented in the following chapters are therefore to be rated as the personal statements of family members of missing persons that reflect the views of the individuals.

4. Effects of involuntary loss of contact

4.1. Loss of contact owing to migration or flight

Eleven persons were interviewed in the study group «Migrants or refugees» including group interviews. The vast majority (nine persons) came to Switzerland to escape conflict in their country of origin. This means they were separated from their loved ones, many of whom had died and some of whom had gone missing. The experience gained in the country of origin and their flight to Switzerland in themselves constitute dramatic incidents with serious consequences for the persons concerned. Furthermore, all of the persons interviewed faced the challenges associated with migration experience and social integration in a new country. These challenges involve learning the language, adapting to unfamiliar types of organisation and customs but also experience of discrimination and difficulties finding employment. Persons who filed an application for asylum in Switzerland also faced difficulties relating to their accommodation, in obtaining a work permit as well as uncertainty as to whether or not they can remain in Switzerland. All these difficulties and stressful situations that accumulate and arise in parallel with the loss of contact with a loved one affect the health,

social and financial situation of the persons interviewed as well as the resources available and the nature of their needs. The results presented in the following reflect this complexity and should be construed in the light of the multiple stressful situations this research group faces.

Uncertainty and ambivalence

The persons interviewed said they found the uncertainty about the fate of their missing loved ones to be extremely difficult and stressful. They are in constant turmoil wondering what has happened to their loved ones and about the reasons why they have lost contact. They are torn between hope and hopelessness. On the one hand, they are aware of the possibility that their missing loved one may be dead. On the other hand, they cling to the tiniest glimmer of hope and are unable to gain closure with the situation until they receive some definite answers. Some persons said during the interviews that they watch television on a regular basis in the hope that they will spot the missing person in broadcasts on the country of origin. News about secret jails or missing loved ones of friends or relatives who have turned up spark renewed hope and some family members of missing persons cling to this kind of information in order to keep the hope alive.

Many of the persons interviewed said it would be easier to have certainty that their loved one is dead than to have to deal with the uncertainty of ambiguous loss⁴²:

«Sometimes it might be better to know the person is dead even though this is not the outcome we are hoping for, it is probably still better to know. At least you can come to terms with it and can mourn the person you have lost. It is the uncertainty that is absolutely intolerable.»⁴³

«I knew my parents had been murdered. I managed to come to terms with this. Yet the problem was the uncertainty regarding the fate of my husband and children. Are they dead or alive? If they have been murdered, ok, I have no choice but to start a new life. It is the uncertainty that hurts the most.»

Many of the persons have feelings of guilt because they left their loved ones behind or feel that they put them in danger with their own activities in the country of origin. Some wonder if they could have prevented losing contact with their loved ones and blame themselves for the situation. They keep going over events in their

mind and wonder what they could have done to prevent their loved ones from going missing.

Family relationships

The absence of the missing loved one and having to deal with the ambiguous situation disrupts the entire family structure as well as communication within the family. The majority of persons interviewed are living in Switzerland and are separated from other family members who stayed behind in the country of origin or who fled to other countries which places an additional strain on family relationships.

These persons said during the interviews that the ambiguous loss had stifled all joy and cheerfulness within the family. They do not have parties any more, do not celebrate birthdays or Christmas etc.:

«Since my son went missing, there is no more joy in our family, we no longer speak to each other in friendly tones, we never have fun, we never laugh, we are all sad.»

In some families, they talk a lot (mostly on the telephone) in the immediate aftermath of the loss of contact in the hope that they will hear some news. However, as time moves on, they tend to avoid the subject because the situation seems hopeless. Some of the persons interviewed said that certain family members did not wish to burden themselves with the loss and no longer talked about it:

⁴² For the definition of ambiguous loss, see Chapter 2.2.

⁴³ The quotes were translated and rendered anonymous where necessary and were edited in the interest of comprehensibility.

«Yes, but somehow the topic... is no longer relevant. So many years have passed and my children can see how badly this is affecting me. It is as though they do not want to talk about it.»

Most of the interviewees also mentioned the different ways family members have of dealing with the loss of contact. Some persons do not wish to keep up the search for the missing person as the years move on, they want to forget the stressful situation, to give up hope and to gain closure. However, other family members are not willing to do so. That is why they withdraw, which disrupts communication within the family. Because of their different needs, some members of certain families break off all contact and some families experience conflict:

«I am dealing with it, myself and my mother are. I think a lot about the others. But my brothers are getting on with their lives, they don't think about the others. They have their own lives to lead and are not interested in anything else.»

Social relationships

The social life of the persons interviewed is very limited owing to their experience as migrants and refugees and to the precarious residence situation in Switzerland. In

the majority of cases, they live separately from other family members and they have left their friends and acquaintances behind in their country of origin. As rejected asylum seekers or temporarily admitted refugees, most of them have no regular work where they could get to know colleagues and have virtually no possibility of and/or resources to take part in social activities. Some of the persons interviewed said it was much more difficult for them to learn the language of their new place of residence because of the worries and problems they face. This too greatly hampers their social integration.

«I was always sick, was constantly stressed out and that is why I stayed in my room. I had nothing meaningful to occupy my time. We don't have any money to do things anyway.»

The relatives of missing persons withdraw because of the depressing, upsetting situation, they do not have the energy to make new contacts or to build new friendships. Several persons interviewed said they had become very introverted and reclusive owing to the loss of contact with a loved one. Most of them do not want to talk to friends about the ambiguous loss. In their experience, they have encountered a lack of understanding and are asked questions that deeply upset them and exacerbate their grief. As time moves on, they come to the conclusion that it is

better not to talk to friends or acquaintances about their search for their loved one for reasons of self protection.

Some of the persons interviewed said they do not talk much about the reasons why they fled their homeland or why they lost contact with their loved ones even with fellow countrymen who have possibly experienced similar things. On the one hand, they said it was too delicate a subject because they never knew what the other person had experienced and whether or not they wanted to talk about it. On the other hand, they said they found their situation stressful enough and did not want to take on anyone else's worries and problems.

Health consequences

All of the persons interviewed bar one said they had numerous emotional problems. They mentioned they were suffering from panic attacks, anxiety, depression, nightmares and severe sleep disorders. All of the persons interviewed bar one said they regularly took sleeping tablets, anti-depressants and/or pain killers. However, they said these rarely helped which is why they had been repeatedly prescribed different or stronger medication.

«With all the worries I have I could not get to sleep even when I took sleeping pills.»

«I suffered from depression and had to see a therapist. I simply could not sleep. The night time seemed like 1,000 years to me.»

Some of the persons interviewed were concerned about how much medication they had to take. They were wondering what side-effects this medication would have on their health in the long term. Nonetheless, they said the current stressful situation outweighed these concerns, forcing them to take the prescribed medication.

Many of the persons interviewed also said they were listless and were suffering from a loss of appetite:

«When you have problems, you have no appetite and do not eat well. You need something to motivate you to eat well.»

One participant in the group interviews said that any time she ate anything she was tormented by questions concerning the well-being of her children. She said she felt guilty to be in a safe country and to be given food when she had no idea whether her children were starving at the same time.

Three persons affected by the loss of contact and traumatic events in their country of origin and by the uncertainty of their

residence status in Switzerland considered their situation to be hopeless and had considered committing suicide on numerous occasions.

«You feel so sad inside that you basically lose the will to live. There are days when you think it would be better to end your life. You think this would put an end to your problems.»

Yet persons in the research group «Migrants or refugees» also said they had numerous physical problems and symptoms, adding that they were suffering from headaches and back ache, some said they were also suffering from gout, high blood pressure, menstruation problems, temporary paralysis, chronic stomach pains and pains in their feet, diabetes, gallstones, allergies etc.

In the case of one of the interviewees whose loved one went missing after he had been living in Switzerland for several years, it was somewhat easier to gauge the emotional impact of the loss of contact. Before losing contact, this person was married and gainfully employed. He said he had been a cheerful person who was full of energy. Since his loved one had gone missing, he had been suffering from disturbed sleep and depression. He had lost his job and is no longer able to integrate into the primary labour market. He has separated from his wife although the reasons for the disintegration of his marriage

were not discussed during the interview. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, one of the persons interviewed was in relatively good health. She has filed a search request for her sister who disappeared over 30 years ago in their home country and whom she barely knew. She said she is in good health and that she has an active social life. However, she admitted she suffers from inner restlessness that prompts her to be busy at all times in order to avoid having time to think and to feel sad. As a result, she sometimes feels that she is overworked, stressed out and not sufficiently available for the family.

Employment

Some of the persons interviewed said it was difficult to find paid employment because of their residence status, some are even prohibited from working. Many are (also) unable to pursue gainful employment because of the state of their mental and/or physical health. They cannot integrate into the primary labour market because they are suffering from depression or physical symptoms. Two of the persons interviewed, for instance, were participating in employment schemes when the interviews were held. Others were unemployed and explained how difficult it would be to look for and apply for a job in their situation. They said they felt as if they were paralysed and, regretted that they have neither the resources nor the strength to make plans for their future careers. The concerns they have about finding a job was an additional stress factor that was also affecting their well-being.

Out of the eight persons who participated in individual interviews, only three were gainfully employed. One of the persons interviewed who was less affected by the loss of contact with her loved one⁴⁴ said the situation had little or no impact on her employment. However, the other two revealed that they were very forgetful and absent-minded at work because of the stressful situation and the constant, grueling thoughts. One person said colleagues at work had to tell her things several times because she is so distracted. She said she felt ashamed, was worried about losing her job and was concerned about what her colleagues think about her.

Financial situation

The financial situation of the family members of missing persons is affected in particular by their employment situation. Furthermore, many incur high costs on the search for their missing loved ones.

Some of the persons interviewed have commissioned persons living in their country of origin to look for their missing loved ones. One person said he had paid over CHF15,000 to friends and public officials. However, none of these search requests had led to the desired success. Some of the persons interviewed ended up admitting that they had been given false information or had been deceived. They had been given assurances that there had been a sighting of their missing

loved one which could not be subsequently confirmed or which came to nothing.

One person interviewed mentioned the high costs incurred by DNA analyses abroad which placed her under financial strain. She saved up the money over many years reducing the already tight family budget in order to be able to pay the expensive analyses out of her own pocket.

4.2. Loss of contact for social or family-related reasons

Twelve persons were interviewed in the group «Social or family-related reasons» including group interviews. All of them grew up in Switzerland, the majority of them are working here. The event leading to ambiguous loss with this group of persons can be attributed to personal or family-related reasons. 50 percent of the persons interviewed were illegitimate children who wanted to get in touch with their biological mother or father. The other 50 percent were looking for a relative that had broken off all contact with them and/or had suddenly vanished under mysterious circumstances.

Uncertainty and ambivalence

With the group «Social or family-related reasons», there is also a discrepancy between the physiological and psychological family and between unclear presence and absences within the family structure. Family members whose loved one suddenly went missing – some of them several decades ago – have no informa-

⁴⁴ Cf. the end of the last chapter on Health consequences.

tion about what happened to their missing loved one. They don't know whether they are still alive, whether they will turn up again at some stage or whether they are long dead. The illegitimate children, some of whom had learned out of the blue that the man they thought was their father was not, feel their own integrity and credibility of their own life story has been shattered. Suddenly the boundaries of the biological family are extended, giving rise to many questions about their own personality and identity. Persons they had thought belonged to their biological family up to this point are suddenly no longer part of it. And suddenly they have relatives they have never met before.

«Well, the only way to describe it is to say I felt as if I had been hit by a bus. I suddenly felt that I no longer knew who I really was.»

The family members of missing loved ones are confronted with a myriad of unanswered questions owing to these situations which constantly preoccupy and trouble them. They wonder, for instance, what happened to the missing person, why they broke off all contact with them and whether they will ever see them again. The interviewed persons expressed how difficult it is for them to deal with this uncertainty and all the unanswered questions:

«It is simply something that is almost impossible to deal with.»

«It isn't even my greatest wish to know she is still alive. I would just like to know what happened to her in those few hours. That I would really like to know...»

Many of the persons whose loved one has gone missing or has broken off all contact also experience feelings of guilt. They wonder if they could have prevented the loss of contact and why they lost contact in the first place.

This ambiguous situation causes ambivalent feelings in all the interviewees. They sway continually between hope of finding the person on the one hand and hopelessness or resignation regarding the search for the missing person on the other. If a family member suddenly broke off all contact, their relatives are sometimes angry with the missing person. At other times they may wish for nothing more than to see this person again and to clarify the situation. Persons looking for their biological father are also confronted with ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they feel the need to get to know their biological father and their biological family, on the other hand they would sometimes prefer to forget the whole thing and to continue living in their current family structures and ignore the actual situation and family relationships. These persons feel that confronting the reality and unanswered questions is very unsettling and disconcerting.

Family relationships

All of the persons interviewed in this research group said that the loss of contact had affected both the family structure and communication within the family. Some of them grew up not knowing their step-father was not their biological father. When they learn the truth, it comes as a huge shock that shatters everything they have been certain about up to this point as well as their self-identity. This has a huge impact on their relationship with their step-father, their biological mother and/or with their (half)-brothers and sisters.

Conflicts also arise when illegitimate children realise that certain family members have kept the truth about the family ties from them for many years, preventing them from learning about their true identity. Some said the family relationships had suffered even during their childhood, particularly the relationship with their step-father or between their mother and their step-father. Some even spoke of mistreatment and violence. The reason for this tension, disharmony and underlying conflicts suddenly becomes clear to some of the persons interviewed when they find out the truth about the family structure. They find it very hard to accept that the truth has been kept from them for many years. This creates a huge breach of trust particularly for persons who realize in retrospect that many persons in their environment were aware of their family history.

Many family members who experienced a sudden loss of contact also said they had faced problematic family situations and events before they lost contact with their loved one. They mentioned deaths, divorces, migration experience and family conflicts. The missing person leaves a gap in the family structure that is impossible to deal with because nobody knows if the missing person will ever turn up again. Social roles and family relationships become totally entrenched. Roles are not redefined and these persons do not form new relationships in a bid to keep the gap open for the missing person:

«She has left a huge gap in our lives. The family has basically fallen apart. Nobody wanted to or was able to fill her shoes. She simply left a gap that can never be filled.»

In all the interviews the difficulties arising from the different ways in which various family members deal and cope with the situation were mentioned. Some persons respond to the stressful situation by going into denial, others create their own answers in order to put an end to the uncertainty while others yet again cannot rest until they have found answers to all their questions. These different strategies and needs cause tension, conflict and even loss of contact between different family members which places an additional strain on the whole family structure.

«My brother doesn't want to meet him (our father), I think he is in denial. We have lost contact since our mother died. He is just not dealing with it and says it is of no interest to him. But I would like to know what happened to him (our father), because I feel there is a piece missing in the jigsaw.»

«Each of us has sort of constructed his own truth or story. And they are all different. We do not discuss the matter because we know that the other person does not think the same way. We all deal with it by ourselves.»

Social relationships

The persons interviewed in the group «Social or family-related reasons» generally feel well looked after in their circle of friends and acquaintances. The majority of them say they have a lot of friends and they do not feel alone. On the other hand, they admit that they rarely talk to anybody about their specific family situation and/or the involuntary loss of contact with their loved one. They say they have realized that even close friends are not really able to understand their situation. Some encountered a lack of understanding or say they had to answer upsetting questions. Others say they faced pity or dismay in their circle of friends which does nothing to help them:

«Yes, I still find it difficult to talk about. I talked about it more in the early days but some people reacted with incomprehension: Why would you still want to look for him? Why would you still want to meet him? You had a father.»

«When the issue was relatively new, I felt that people were very compassionate when I talked about it. Some were at a loss what to say and showed pity. But that was not what I needed or indeed wanted, it did not benefit me in any way.»

This experience may prompt the relatives of missing persons to shut themselves off from their environment. Some of the persons interviewed only speak about the involuntary loss of contact with very close relatives and/or friends; others no longer talk about it with anybody in their social environment. Many of the family members of missing persons feel very much abandoned and isolated with their specific situation:

«For a very long time, I felt that I was the only person on earth who had experienced this kind of thing! »

Illegitimate children who were deprived of the truth about their kinship for years subsequently have difficulty continuing to trust people close to them. This experi-

ence not only has a negative impact on the relationship with the relevant family members but also on all their other social contacts. They withdraw, find it hard to open up to others and regard them with suspicion. One of the persons interviewed also said the family situation, particularly her quest to find her biological father, was affecting her relationships with men. She said she had been involved in many different relationships and felt that she was actually looking for the missing father figure.

As in their circle of friends, the family members of missing persons said they did not receive the understanding or support they had hoped for from public authorities either. Many of the persons interviewed were disappointed with the support and assistance they received from public authorities. They said they had encountered a lack of interest, dismay or even unfriendliness which makes them feel even more insecure in their predicament:

«What I find almost the worst aspect of the whole thing is the indifference shown by public authorities. Are they trying to hide or conceal something? Is it something they do not wish to deal with? Particularly for a country that is governed by the rule of law as we are, you are made to feel like a nuisance when you ask who your father was or whether there are any documents available or whether you can take a look at the register.

If you are denied this... To make matters worse, you feel you are not being taken seriously. This is in fact what hurt me the most.»

Several of the persons interviewed said they would like to have encountered more understanding, more clear information about the legal basis and other search or support options. Many also said they were disappointed because they had hoped to have easier access to relevant information at public authorities.

Health consequences

Compared to the migrants, fewer persons in the research group «Social or family-related reasons» said they were suffering physical symptoms or that the ambiguous loss was affecting their physical health.

The majority said they were in good health and rarely go to the doctor. Only one person said she had suffered from diabetes for a while. She establishes a metaphorical correlation between this illness and the involuntary loss of contact with her loved one:

«Diabetes stands for the sweetness in life I have lost.»

Some of the persons in this group said they had suffered from addictions such as bulimia or alcoholism in the past but had eventually managed to overcome them. Although the persons in this research

group didn't mention any serious psychological problems, they all admitted that the involuntary loss of contact was affecting their emotional well-being. The stress seems to be at its worst immediately after they lose contact with their loved one. The persons interviewed spoke of great sadness, inner turmoil, despair, gruelling questions to which there were no answers and feelings of guilt in relation to the situation. Their lives had gone off the rails for a while as a result of the loss of contact with their loved one. They lose their emotional equilibrium and some said they had a serious identity crisis. Many withdrew from their social life, at least to begin with, and tried to find their own explanation for the situation:

«Of course there was a time when I didn't do that, when I smoked and drank too much and sort of lost the run of myself. I was a bit like a candle blowing in the wind, losing my way and my focus.»

«When I was 20 or 21 years old I really had an identity crisis. I was living abroad at the time and I genuinely had a crisis.»

The majority of persons in the research group «Social or family-related reasons» have enough resources to find their feet over time and find ways of coping with the ambiguous loss. In fact the majority of them said they were in good form. They

either try to accept the situation as it is or they suppress all the worries and feelings associated with it:

«Primarily by suppressing them. I suppose we have all meanwhile found a way of coping.»

«I have established a daily routine for myself. In this regard, it perhaps less of a burden than it used to be. I simply get on with things.»

The emotional strain caused by the involuntary loss of contact is not preventing them from leading a normal life or meeting their social, professional and/or family obligations. Yet virtually all of the persons interviewed said the loss of contact with a loved one still upsets them years, if not decades, later and often makes them feel sad:

«I personally think it is something that is always going on at the back of my mind. It is affecting the life of each and every one of us probably without us realising it.»

«If I make sure to look after myself each and every day and do not indulge in this emotion, I manage to cope quite well. However, it resurfaces at Easter, Whitsun and Christmas and at other times in between, and his birthday is coming up soon. The best thing to

do on such occasions is to go on an outing and to try not to think about it, otherwise I get really down.»

«It is not as if I lose any sleep over it, it has nothing to do with my job.»

These quotes show that it is impossible for the family members of missing persons to fully get over the loss of contact with a loved one even after many years. Although they manage to go through the motions of everyday life, the uncertainty and stress and grief caused by the ambiguity are always lingering in the background. They cannot prevent the feelings associated with the involuntary loss of contact from resurfacing time and again, casting a shadow over their everyday lives. That is why the majority of family members of missing persons wish nothing more than to find definite answers to their unanswered questions and to be able to put an end to the uncertainty:

«The hardest thing for me is not being able to find him. That is definitely the biggest problem for me. Otherwise things are ok, you just get on with your life and think about it now and again.»

Employment

As described in the previous chapter, the family members of missing persons manage to meet their professional obligations despite the stressful situation they are in. The majority of them confirm that the involuntary loss of contact has not affected their work:

One of the persons interviewed had already retired when she lost contact with her loved one. Another family member of a missing person suspects that the family situation influenced her choice of a social profession. Another person said she had left her job shortly after receiving the news at work that her loved one had disappeared. However, some years later she said she went back to work for the same employer.

Some persons said the involuntary loss of contact with a loved one had affected their relationship with their superiors and colleagues. Since they had withdrawn from social life and were having difficulty continuing to trust other people, their relationships with other people had deteriorated not just in their personal lives but also in their professional lives.

Financial situation

The involuntary loss of contact did not have any serious impact on the financial situation of the persons interviewed in the research group «Social or family-related reasons».

Some spent money travelling to other countries to look for their missing loved ones. However, this expenditure did not put too much of a strain on the household budget.

Some of the persons looking for their biological father grew up in more modest surroundings since their mother had been the sole bread-winner of the family. In other cases, the grandfather or step-father had contributed to the family finances.

4.3. Stressful situations after the search has ended

A number of stressful situations and difficulties were mentioned at the group interviews conducted with former clients of the SRC Tracing Service whose missing loved ones had been found alive that arose after the search phase was over. Certain difficulties and problems manifested themselves even during the search of potential participants for the group interviews. One of the persons contacted, for instance, said she had not yet managed to pluck up the courage to get in touch with her father even though she had obtained his address six months previously. Others intimated that the relationship with the family member they had found was tense or problematic, they spoke of illness and even death.

It became obvious at the group interviews that in many cases the reunification with the missing loved had come about in ways they had not anticipated. During the search, these persons wished nothing more than to put an end to the uncertainty and to find their missing loved one. They said they were not prepared for the situation after the missing person had

been found or for the new issues that arose. In some cases, for instance, the missing person was not willing to resume contact with the family. Or the reunion with a missing person they had never seen before or who they had not seen in several decades did not go as they had hoped or anticipated. Some of the interviewed persons were confronted with many questions in relation to the own identity after having met their biological father or mother.

The issue of family reunification was raised at the group interview with migrants. It is very stressful for them and difficult to accept if a family member who is found in another country is unable to enter Switzerland for reasons associated with the right of residence. This was, for instance, experienced by a female migrant whose eight children had gone missing. One of her sons had been found at a refugee camp. Because this son has reached the age of 18, the family cannot be reunified and there is no way mother and son can see each other again. There was another person whose children were only permitted to enter Switzerland after three years of negotiations with public authorities. Her husband who had been found eight years before through the ICRC had not been granted an entry permit at the time the group interviews were held.

«When my children were found but were not allowed to come to Switzerland, I sank back into a deep depression.»

One migrant whose sister had been found on another continent faced other challenges yet again. She had no money to pay for a flight there. She was unable to communicate with her nieces because they did not speak the same language. This had motivated her to take language lessons so that she could speak to her sister's family. She has furthermore been able to overcome the financial obstacles thanks to a donation by a generous person who had heard her story in an interview on the radio.

5. Resources and coping strategies

In this chapter, we look at the resources and coping strategies to which the persons interviewed have access to enable them to learn to live and cope (better) with the stressful situation of involuntary loss of contact. Coping strategies refer to activities and actions the family members of missing persons engage in with a view to changing the situation or coping more effectively with what has happened. With resources we mean the individual, social, economic and cultural factors that give the family members of missing persons stability and strengthen their resilience. Coping strategies can, but need not necessarily, become resources.

5.1. Loss of contact owing to migration or flight

Active search

It is very important for the family members of missing persons to actively look for the missing relative. In doing so, they hope to find some sign of life of their missing loved one and to put an end to the uncertainty on the one hand. On the other hand, they are very keen to do something and not to remain inactive in a situation that is hard to bear. One of the persons interviewed, for instance, said explicitly that the search request was less about obtaining results but more about doing some-

thing to ensure no stone was left unturned.

In addition to filing a search request with the SRC Tracing Service, the persons interviewed had contacted other national Red Cross societies, the Swiss Federal Office for Migration, the embassies of their country of origin or other countries. They said many of their queries had gone unanswered. They said they were disappointed that they did not receive more support or information from these organisations. It had given them the impression that people were not taking them or their concerns seriously which upset them greatly at what was already a difficult time in their lives. Many of the persons interviewed said that owing to this experience they were most relieved and grateful when they contacted the SRC Tracing Service, saying they felt well looked after and well-advised:

«The people who gave us really good advice were the people from the Red Cross.»

The hope that was revived when they filed a tracing request with the SRC gave them strength on the one hand but intensified the emotional strain on these persons on

the other. Many said being torn between hope and hopelessness was almost too much to bear. A number of persons interviewed said that every time the telephone rang they thought it would be the SRC. And every time they received a letter from the SRC, they hoped it would be a letter informing them their missing loved one had been found. These intensive emotions tended to die down after several months of unsuccessful searches, sometimes turning into frustration and anger. At these times, some say they began to doubt the intensity and reliability of the searches carried out by the SRC Tracing Service. Or they said they feared the search was being carried out in the wrong country. Other persons interviewed said they also felt frustrated and helpless that they were unable to travel to the country of origin or another country to search for the missing persons themselves.

Two participants in the study decided to close their search request with the SRC Tracing Service because of the huge stress and the lack of hope it had caused. Both these persons said they wanted to put an end to the ambivalent fluctuating emotions, to abandon all hope and to stop the search. In doing so, they said they wanted to find closure with their past so that they could free up more resources for the present and the future:

«The file is now closed. I couldn't carry on like that, I had to go into therapy because I was in such turmoil.»

Support received from professionals

The majority of family members of missing persons from the group «Migrants or refugees» received assistance and support from social workers in Switzerland because of the precarious situation they were in. These social workers and the staff of the SRC Tracing Service were important reference persons for these people. Some participants in the study said the social workers, the staff of the SRC as well as the psychologists assigned to them were the only people they spoke to about the loss of contact with their missing loved one.

With the exception of two persons, all of the participants in the study had required psychological assistance at the time the interviews were held or at some stage in the past. The majority said they were extremely grateful for the professional support they received and were extremely satisfied with it. Some of these persons required intensive support, many over a period of several years. The therapists helped them not to give up hope despite the traumatic events and to gradually learn to look to the future. It was a matter of assisting some persons who were extremely stressed out and depressed over their family and legal situation to establish a daily routine and to occupy and distract them as much as possible. Therapy helped others to build a new life for themselves in Switzerland despite all their worries and unanswered questions.

«Yes, this (psychological support) is really helping me, for my well-being in general, showing me how to get on with my life despite all I have to go through.»

Several persons mentioned how reluctant they had been initially to go into therapy. Some said this type of support was not common in their country of origin. They said it is normally the family or community that offers this kind of support there. Others were reluctant to seek psychological support owing to prejudice and social ideas suggesting that only sick or mad people see a psychiatrist.

Language was another obstacle for the group of migrants. All of the persons interviewed began their therapy in the presence of an interpreter. Some said they developed a trusting relationship both with their therapist and the interpreter. By contrast, others explained that the presence of a third person and a fellow countryman in particular had prevented them from opening up fully during therapy, adding that the events they had experienced in their country of origin had made them very suspicious of persons from the same region. These participants in the study said they were only able to tell the full story in therapy when the services of an interpreter were no longer required.

Only one participant in the study said she had a negative experience with a therapist. She said the therapist had shown no compassion for her situation or concerns

and had merely prescribed tranquilizers and sleeping pills. That is why she stopped attending this therapist. She said she wanted to find a therapist with a migration background, ideally from the same language region as her. She hoped in so doing to find a person with more empathy and intercultural skills who would be able to help her and whom she would be more inclined to trust:

«Because anyone who has shown compassion for my situation spoke the same language as me. It doesn't have to be someone who speaks the same language, but it's as if the culture of these persons has been extended».

The interviews held seem to indicate that it is the therapists helping family members of missing loved ones not to shut themselves off and to look to the future despite the stressful situation they endure who are the most helpful. These therapists do not try to encourage them to accept that their loved one may be dead even though there is no evidence to prove this. Rather, their aim is to help the family members of missing loved ones to build a new life for themselves in Switzerland despite the uncertainties and the stressful situation they face. There was just one case among the interviewees where the therapist apparently tried to persuade him to accept the fact that his missing loved one was probably dead - even though there was no evidence to support this - and to find clo-

sure in the grief process. This person showed great difficulty accepting this presumed death and translating the psychologist's recommendations into practise. He apparently tried to force himself to do something he was not fully convinced of or was incapable of doing in view of the uncertain situation.

Family and social ties

The majority of persons interviewed in the group «Migrants or refugees» came to Switzerland alone which means they have less family solidarity to rely on. However, many say that they have made a few good friends from the same region of origin with whom they can discuss their sorrows and joys and indeed difficulties. They have similar experiences and face similar challenges as their fellow countrymen both in terms of what they experienced in their country of origin and in relation to their situation in Switzerland. They said these friendships gave them stability and support during difficult times, giving them meaning and hope⁴⁵. If these persons do not live in the same place in Switzerland, it is more difficult for the family members of missing persons to cultivate these very important relations.

The interviewees who had come to Switzerland with children, whose children were born in Switzerland or whose children had joined them in Switzerland within the framework of family reunification

said their duties and responsibilities as parents had given them great strength and motivation to rise to life's challenges and to look to the future:

«When the children were in Switzerland and I knew that other members of my family were dead, I told myself I had to build a new life for myself. I can't just cry, I have to remain strong for the children. I need to raise my children well. I need to be strong for my children.»

Some of the persons interviewed also said their husbands, daughters-in-law or sons-in-law were important reference persons. They are less affected by the loss of contact with the missing loved one and can provide them with support and understanding:

«Perhaps it was easier with her (my daughter-in-law). It was much more difficult to talk to my children about these things.»

One participant in the study is able to return to his country of origin and to visit his family at regular intervals. He said being in touch with other family members was doing him good and that he misses this kind of support in Switzerland:

⁴⁵ See also what Boss has written about the importance of the psychological family (of choice) Boss, 2004, p. 557 ff.

«It is difficult when we are on our own. Things are somehow different when we are all together.»

Employment

Gainful employment or participating in an employment scheme were also mentioned as important resources in the interviews. Involvement in the primary or secondary labour market brings security and structure to everyday life. The persons concerned are given tasks to perform and can achieve financial independence. Furthermore, contact with other people, for instance, by working in pubs or restaurants or in healthcare, has a really positive effect on the family members of missing persons. Even if they cannot forget all their concerns, they are forced to concentrate on their work and to put their concerns to the back of their minds at least for a while:

«It helped me to work. I worked a lot, that helped me.(...) It meant I didn't have much time to think. After I retired, I felt very upset again. I had more time to think ... and that is when I went to the Red Cross.»

Many of the persons interviewed in this research group were incapable of pursuing employment on the primary labour market or to find a job because of their poor state of health and/or precarious residence situation in Switzerland. Two were integrated into an employment scheme

with the help of social workers and the competent psychologist. They were hugely grateful for this. This activity gave them motivation and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. They had a clear goal and a task to perform:

«It is great to have a job, it distracts you. It is very important to meet other people, to talk to them and to have a laugh with them.»

In addition, the family members of missing persons participating in an employment scheme received support from professionals and were able to adjust their working hours if necessary, depending on their state of health.

Faith and religion

Faith plays a very important role for many family members of missing persons both in social and personal terms.

Some of the persons interviewed go to Church on a regular basis and have found a new family there; persons who accompany them and support them, show them solidarity and offer assistance and advice. The family members of missing persons participate regularly in parish activities which give them a routine and something meaningful to do:

«I met some lovely people at Church. At Church, everyone is equal, there are hardly any differences. Everyone has their own story to tell, it is like being a member of a family. That really helped me.»

Aside from this social aspect, religion and faith also give them personal stability and purpose in a situation that is characterised by uncertainty and turmoil. Prayer gives the family members of missing persons strength and inner peace. For a moment they stop looking for answers to unanswered questions and tell themselves that there is a higher meaning to all things that appear to be inexplicable. Reflecting on religious figures who also faced suffering and loss comforts them and helps them to accept their own fate more readily.

Two persons said that their faith and certain parts of the Bible had prevented them from committing suicide. The thought that suicide is considered to be a sin in their religion helped them to disregard it as a way out of their situation.

Additional resources

All of the migrants interviewed mentioned at least one activity that gave them comfort, diversion and strength in their situation even if it was just for a moment. The following activities were mentioned in addition to the aspects mentioned in the previous chapters:

- Football matches, although the person in question was forced to give up playing because of health problems
- Singing and listening to music, or even just listening to Church bells chiming
- Spending time with the children of friends and acquaintances
- Participating in social activities, for instance, in the area of integration, in order to find some distraction and to meet other people
- To accept things the way they are and to mobilise the inner strength to do so

5.2. Loss of contact for social or family-related reasons:

Active search

The people in this research group also said that it is very important for them to do something to put an end to the uncertainty instead of sitting around doing nothing:

«The best thing always was to be able to do something proactively, that really helped.»

The persons interviewed looked for the missing person in different ways, depending on the situation. They went to the police, reported their loved one missing to the Consulate or Foreigner's Office of the country the missing person was living or residing in and even asked the Road Traffic Authorities and the Old Age Pensioner and Dependent Insurance Offices for information and residential addresses.

Some of them received information from these authorities, some were denied access to the registers for data protection reasons. Many of the persons interviewed said they were disappointed at the lack of support and at the fact that public authorities did not seem prepared to deal with their search request.

Other persons began a search for their missing loved one themselves. They travelled to the country where they hoped to find their missing loved one, contacted local authorities there and even contacted the producers of TV programmes. One person actually placed an ad in a local newspaper. They also searched the Internet and Facebook or sent e-mails and letters to addresses where the missing loved one might be living.

The persons looking for missing loved ones heard about the SRC Tracing Service from friends, Fedpol or their lawyer. They also came across the service provided by the SRC on the Internet, in magazines or in radio broadcasts.

The interviewees said they felt the SRC Tracing Service provides professional and compassionate service. They felt relieved to receive support in the search for their loved ones and to be able to hand the search over to the competent persons:

«Now I can say I have launched (the search). And I have help. It is very important to know that you are not alone, you don't have to do it

alone, you have someone supporting you who knows what needs to be done.»

Yet they also said it was just as important for them to have found a conversation partner who takes their concerns seriously and listens to them. Their contact with the SRC Tracing Service showed them that there are other people in similar situations. They said this does them good, gives them courage and boosts their confidence.

«I think I am feeling a lot better now, it has really boosted my self-confidence. I think realising that my story has been acknowledged has been hugely important for me.»

«The road ahead is probably a long one and I just hope we will get some information. However, I certainly feel very well looked after. I would not have managed on my own, without the help of the Tracing Service I would have given up again, I am certain, because it still triggers so many emotions.»

Regardless of these positive effects of contact with the SRC Tracing Service, the intensification of ambivalent feelings was mentioned in relation to the search request. On the one hand, it raises the hope of the family members of missing

persons that they will receive answers to their unanswered questions and that they will find their missing loved one. On the other hand, the family members of missing persons are afraid to be disappointed and to have to continue living with ambiguous loss:

«I try not to think about it and not to have too many hopes and yet I still have hope. It is sort of ambivalent, I have huge hopes in the search but at the same time I need to tell myself that it might once again lead to nothing.»

Support received from professionals

Only few of the persons interviewed in this research group have consulted therapists to help them cope with their ambiguous loss.

One of the persons interviewed said she had undergone systematic psychoanalysis over a period or time which she said was of little or no benefit to her.

Another person spoke about respiratory therapy that had had a positive influence on their well-being. One person had undergone one-on-one psychological supervision in an attempt to find ways of coping better with the situation.

The other persons interviewed said they had never felt the need to seek psychological support. Some expressed their doubts

about whether a professional would really be able to help them.

Family and social ties

As mentioned in the foregoing, the family members of missing persons tend to avoid talking to friends about their situation. Furthermore, in the majority of cases communication becomes difficult or breaks down entirely within their own families as a result of ambiguous loss.

Nonetheless, the persons in the research group «Social or family-related reasons» have at least one reference person in their family with whom they can talk about the ambiguous loss. In many cases, this person is a spouse who supports them in their predicament. But this role can also be taken on by brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts, their own children or in-laws. The solidarity and warmth extended by these family members does them the world of good:

«My family, my three children and my husband listen to me and support me.»

Other persons look for a reference person outside the family, for instance, friends who have experienced a difficult situation or suffered a loss within the family themselves.

Yet it also does these persons good to mingle with more distant social contacts and friends who offer them distraction

and stability. They go to the movies, meet up with friends, become involved in their local Church community or in social organisations.

Employment

Only one person mentioned casually that she found her job to be a resource that helped her to cope with her stressful situation. She said she spent less time thinking about the ambiguous loss when she was working and looking after her own family. After she retired, the desire to get in touch with her missing loved one increased.

Other participants in the study said that diversion and routine helped them to cope with their situation.

Faith and religion

Faith is an extremely important if not the most important resource in dealing with ambiguous loss for a large number of the persons interviewed. Some of them spoke of God, Jesus or their Catholic faith. Others tended to speak of a metaphysical elemental force or life force that can be found in all forms of life:

«I am very fortunate in that I now have God in my life, I can place the cross I carry in His hands which gives me some peace of mind.»

«I know how this works in metaphysical terms, I have studied how it works, where this elemental force is found in the human spirit and

what impact it can have. And this is what helps me to cope with my life. Without it I think I would have died a long time ago.»

Religion or spirituality give the family members of missing persons above all peace of mind and confidence. Confidence in life and certainty that there is a reason for everything and that all will be well in the end. It helps them to accept things as they are even if they do not understand them and do not see the meaning behind them. In the moments when they feel united with their faith, it becomes slightly easier to cope with all the unanswered questions and the uncertainty⁴⁶.

Dealing with the life story of Jesus is helping one woman who is looking for her biological father to get on with her life despite having many unanswered questions. Identifying with Jesus enables her to justify her existence and gives her the reassurance that she can live her life even though she does not know all there is to know about her parents and her family.

Just as faith helps the family members of missing persons to accept ambiguous situations and issues more readily, it can also enhance confidence and ignite hope that one day they will find answers to their unanswered questions:

⁴⁶ See also what Boss has written about the importance of religion in situations of ambiguous loss in Boss, 2000, p. 31 ff.

«It is simply a never-ending prayer and above all the peace of mind and trust that all will be well in the end.»

Additional resources

When asked about other things or activities that enhance their well-being, the family members of missing persons mentioned various activities such as sport, spending time outdoors or participating in cultural events with friends. As their socio-economic situation is better than that of the migrants interviewed, they have more possibilities of pursuing beneficial activities that take their minds off their predicament.

A number of persons also look for books and information on the Internet about the search of biological parents or the issue of missing loved ones. They said it helps them to better understand their situation. And it shows them that other people are going through similar things:

«Friends, specialist literature and novels certainly gave me strength. Literature and talking about it helps you to understand it better.»

Others try to get to know the country of origin of their biological father by reading books or meeting people they know from this region.

One of the persons interviewed worked hard on her own personal and spiritual development in order to be able to cope with the challenges of her situation:

«I certainly think it is very much about my own development. If I accept him the way he is, I am giving him the opportunity to learn something new. And the same applies to me. If I deliberately let go of my feelings which are after all negative feelings, controlled by my ego, I am giving myself the opportunity not to dwell on the negative things such as my hatred and anger.»

One person said that time was helping to create some distance and that she did not feel quite as affected by the situation as she had done just after she lost contact with her loved one.

6. Needs of the family members of missing persons

In the interviews, the family members of missing persons were asked about their needs in relation to the services provided by the SRC but also other more general needs in relation to the involuntary loss of contact and to how they were dealing with this stressful situation. The comments of the various groups interviewed are summed up in the following.

6.1. Needs in relation to the search

Many of the persons interviewed said they were most satisfied with the service provided by the SRC Tracing Service and had no other needs in this regard. The main concern of the interviewees is to ensure the search for their missing loved one continues. Some said they would appreciate regular updates on the status of the search. Even if there is nothing new to report, they said it is important for them to know that the search is being carried on. However, they also said they would like to have more personal support:

«I am enjoying this chat, I like to talk about it. Sometimes I would prefer to talk than to communicate in writing».

As the previous chapters revealed, the talks with the staff of the SRC Tracing Service are a great support for the family members of missing persons. These encounters give them the opportunity to speak about their situation, the difficulties they face and their feelings. They feel they are being taken seriously. Some pointed out that they only speak openly about the involuntary loss of contact with their missing loved one and their stressful situation with the staff of the SRC.

In the research group «Social or family-related reasons» it was suggested that awareness of the SRC Tracing Service be raised among public authorities and agencies. They also said they would find it useful if concrete information about the general legal environment and addresses of specialist points of contact was available and distributed. This information could also be posted on the Internet. It was established in this context that this research group uses the Internet more frequently to find this information than the group of migrants who tend not to have a sufficient command of the national languages. The group «Social or family-related reasons» would also like to receive more support in their dealings with public authorities at home and abroad. They would also find assistance from an inter-

prefer most helpful in their communication with public authorities abroad. One person said she would like someone to accompany her when she goes to inspect the files.

In the event that the missing loved one is found, it is a major concern to the migrants that they receive support in bringing about family reunification. They themselves do not have enough knowledge of the institutions and/or the language to ask about their rights and options or, if possible, to apply for family reunification.

If the outcome of the search is positive, one person in the research group «Social or family-related reasons» said she would like the SRC Tracing Service to act as a go-between between her and her missing loved one in case the latter does not want resume contact.

6.2. Needs in relation to their personal situation

The persons in the group «Migrants or refugees» interviewed, the majority of whom have applied for asylum, face many other stressful situations in addition to the involuntary loss of contact with their missing loved one. If some of these challenges could be eliminated or reduced, they said they could mobilise more resources which would help them to cope better with the ambiguous loss. That is why persons in this research group said they would like to receive support with the integration process in a number of areas such as looking

for a job, regulating their residence status, learning the language and with social integration.

The needs of the group «Social or family-related reasons» relate mainly to receiving information that will help them to understand their situation better and to better estimate their options for action. At the group interview, it was also suggested that Internet forums be established to provide useful information to enable the family members of missing persons to communicate with each other.

Most of the persons interviewed said they would like to have more personal talks with professionals and specialist agencies to discuss their situation. They said they consider contact with qualified professionals who do not belong to their family or circle of friends to be most valuable. They also mentioned the possibility of meeting other persons affected by ambiguous loss and of talking to them. Many of the persons from both research groups would greatly welcome this. On the one hand, it would help them to see that other people are in a similar predicament. On the other hand, they find that contact with persons who have gone through similar things and who could understand their situation would be hugely helpful and encouraging:

«It would be nice to talk to others about their experiences. You realize you are not alone when you talk to other people who are going through the same thing. You see that others are suffering too and are experiencing problems. And perhaps there are a few whose children have been found. That could give us fresh hope.»

«I have often thought it would be nice to talk to someone who has gone through the same thing.»

However, the group of migrants said that they would need the financial resources (to cover travel expenses) and the time (to travel) to be able to participate in such discussion groups. In addition, two persons from conflict-ridden regions said it would not be possible for them to participate in talks with other persons from their country of origin.

Some of the persons looking for missing loved ones had no desire to speak to strangers about their situation. Two of the persons interviewed said they would only be interested in talking to relatives of missing persons whose missing loved one had been found. They said they hoped this would allow them to gain new hope and to receive suggestions for additional search possibilities.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

7.1. Conclusion

This exploratory study is based on 16 qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with clients of the SRC Tracing Service who are looking for missing loved ones. In addition, two group interviews were conducted with former clients of the SRC Tracing Service whose missing loved ones had been found alive. The subject matter of the study was the subjective estimation by family members of missing persons of the impact the involuntary loss of contact is having on various aspects of their lives and of existing and potential resources that might help them to cope with the stressful situation. The qualitative approach combined with very heterogeneous samples made it possible to assess a wide range of different personal conditions, stressful situations and coping strategies.

The sample group «Migrants or refugees» comprised persons who had lost contact with a family member as a result of political conflict, fleeing their homeland or migration. Some of them had experienced violence and war in their country of origin and most of them had travelled to Switzerland without any other members of their family. Here in Switzerland, they are living in precarious and very uncertain situations owing to their residence situa-

tion. They are very isolated in social terms and the majority of them are not gainfully employed. The state of mental and physical health of the persons in this research group is noticeably poor. They suffer from a wide range of physical symptoms and the majority of persons interviewed have had to consult qualified psychologists in the past, some are still attending them. There is a very high consumption of sleeping pills and antidepressants, some persons even said they had considered suicide. The involuntary loss of contact experienced by the persons in this research group constitutes just one in a wide range of burdens they are confronted with. Owing to the experiences in the country of origin and their precarious situation in Switzerland they have very few personal resources available to enhance their well-being and strengthen their resilience. Owing to their (residence) situation in Switzerland, however, the majority of these persons are in touch with social workers and other professionals who support them in any way they can and refer them to suitable healthcare institutions and/or specialist agencies.

On the one hand, the survey group «Social or family-related reasons» included persons who were born out of wedlock and who were looking for their biological father or mother. On the other hand, per-

sons were interviewed who had lost contact with a family member from one day to the next owing to family conflicts or for other reasons. All of the persons interviewed in this group bar one had grown up in Switzerland. The involuntary loss of contact and in certain cases the sudden confrontation with the truth about their kinship comes as a huge shock for the persons concerned which completely shatters their emotional equilibrium and self-identity. The persons interviewed in this research group have access to certain resources which allows them to find ways of coping with the stressful situation. All of them have jobs (with the exception of one person who had reached retirement age by the time the interviews were held) and are earning a living. They have a social network that supports them and the resources to engage in activities that enhance their well-being. Very few of the persons interviewed in this research group required the support of a therapist. The others see no need for this and say they are able to cope by themselves with the loss of contact and the burdens resulting from it.

Regardless of these very different starting situations, experiences and living circumstances, similarities and trends that apply to both research groups were identified in relation to the research questions. The involuntary loss of contact with the associated uncertainty and many unanswered questions places a huge strain on all the persons interviewed which is present at all times, even if it is at the back of their minds. In all interviews, the family members of

missing persons said they were torn between hope and hopelessness. Even for those who are coping well with their lives and everyday chores the loss of contact with their loved one is a constant thorn in their side which they cannot get rid of until they find out what has happened to this person. This situation adversely affects the emotional and/or physical well-being and the social relationships of all of the persons interviewed. They withdraw from social life and try to find a solution to the situation for themselves. The loss of contact and different ways of coping can cause tension, a breakdown in communication and even conflict within families. Yet the stressful situation also affects the financial and employment situation of many of these persons.

At the same time, employment, friends and family members are also mentioned as a very important resource. Contact with persons they trust within their family or circle of friends and an activity that gives financial security, structure and diversion helps these persons to get on with their lives. Quite a few of the persons interviewed also said religion and/or faith were an important resource. Religion and faith helped them to accept the ambiguous situation and the many unanswered questions about the fate of their missing loved one and to place their questions about the reasons why into the hands of a higher power. They also said their faith gives them the strength to cling to hope and to move on with their lives.

Many of the persons interviewed said they were disappointed with the information and assistance provided by public authorities and other institutions whom they had asked for help. They did not receive the information they expected to receive and would like to have received more support and understanding from the competent persons or public authorities they had sought information from. The family members of missing persons said it is very important to receive information about their rights and search options and to get in touch with the competent authorities. Furthermore, the persons interviewed also expressed the need for a neutral and qualified professional with whom they could discuss their experience and the emotional strain they are under.

7.2. Suggestions for psychosocial support for the family members of missing persons

This study shows that there is a huge need for psychosocial support among the clients of the SRC Tracing Service. However, suitable services for the family members of missing persons are in short supply in Switzerland. What is more, the persons interviewed said they had difficulty obtaining information on the few services that are available.

The suggestions made in the following on enhancing psychosocial support for the family members of missing persons in Switzerland are based on the comments

made by the persons interviewed and the review of literature on existing approaches.

Establish a central counselling agency for the family members of missing persons:

To better support and to facilitate better orientation for the family members of missing persons in Switzerland, it would be meaningful to establish a point of contact and/or counselling centres for persons affected by involuntary loss of contact with a loved one. These agencies should provide information on search possibilities, search services available and on the relevant legal basis. Furthermore, psychosocial services and counselling should be offered to help the relatives of missing family members to deal with the stressful situation.

The counselling centre could also provide the following specific services:

- Mediate between the families of missing persons and public authorities and accompany them on appointments to these public authorities
- Provide interpreting services (for migrants) at interviews with public authorities and for correspondence with other countries (if a search for missing persons is being conducted in another country)
- Advise and refer the family members of missing persons to therapists who are qualified to deal with this issue

- When indicated, arrange for the whole family to have professional counselling
- Support the relatives of missing persons and their families after the search request has been terminated regardless of whether the outcome is positive or negative
- Assist the family members of missing persons with their social integration, particularly by cooperating with the competent agencies and civil organisations in the neighbourhood of the persons concerned

Integrate the concept of ambiguous loss defined by Pauline Boss⁴⁷ into counselling sessions with the family members of missing persons: Pauline Boss is the only qualified specialist who has conducted comprehensive research into the situation of the family members of missing persons and possible support measures. Dealing with the concept of ambiguous loss can foster understanding of the situation of the family members of missing persons both among professionals and the persons themselves. Broaching the ambivalent feelings caused by ambiguous loss can ease the burden on the persons concerned. In connection with search requests, it is also recommended that the both-and-thinking approach developed by Pauline Boss be incorporated. The families of missing persons should learn that they can both hope that their missing loved one will be found while building a

new life for themselves and forming new social relationships at the same time.

Specifically, professional agencies dealing with the family members of missing persons should be advised to implement the following measures:

- Train employees on the concept of ambiguous loss defined by Pauline Boss
- Develop concrete possibilities and instructions (in cooperation with suitable professionals) on how the concept of ambiguous loss can be incorporated into counselling sessions
- Implement regular intervision on how to apply the concept of ambiguous loss in counselling sessions

Raise awareness among professionals:

Professional therapists and doctors should be informed about the situations of the families of missing persons and be given information about suitable intervention strategies. Psychologists need to be trained specifically for intervention in connection with involuntary loss of contact.

We propose implementing the following measures:

- Publish an information brochure on involuntary loss of contact and suitable intervention approaches for medical and therapeutic professionals
- Publish information in specialist

⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter 2.2.

magazines and within the framework of advanced training for professional therapists, social workers, representatives of public authorities etc.

- Create a list of professional therapists in the whole of Switzerland who are familiar with the specific situation of families of missing persons and with suitable therapeutic approaches

Organisation of exchange meetings and self-help groups:

It can be extremely beneficial and helpful for the families of missing persons to talk to other people in a similar predicament. These encounters can be informal and initiated by establishing contact between interested persons. However, exchange meetings or group talks for the family members of missing persons could also be organised by suitable agencies or tracing services which could also provide professional support. The following requirements should be met when exchange meetings are organised in Switzerland:

- Develop an agenda for the exchange meetings incorporating the experience of Boss and Preitler⁴⁸
- Hold meetings under the guidance of qualified professionals
- Cover travel expenses for participants who are destitute
- Be aware of ethnic conflicts and

sensitivities when putting groups together

- Adopt transcultural approaches⁴⁹
- This exchange of experience could be organised through Internet forums for certain persons (particularly those in the category «Social or family-related reasons»)

Providing the families of missing persons with information:

An information brochure containing relevant information and addresses should be compiled for the families of missing persons. If necessary, a separate brochure should be published for the various target groups. This brochure should be translated into the most important foreign languages for migrants⁵⁰.

It should contain the following information:

- General information about involuntary loss of contact and on the theory of ambiguous loss
- Addresses of points of contact and counselling services for the family members of missing persons
- Information on legal basis and counselling services
- Website addresses, addresses of online

⁴⁸ Cf. Chapter 2.2.

⁴⁹ Cf. for instance, Domenig, 2007.

⁵⁰ Cf. www.migesplus.ch.

forums and self-help groups that deal with involuntary loss of contact

- Suitable literature on the subject
- Addresses of professional therapists who are familiar both with the unique situation of family members of missing persons and with suitable therapeutic approaches

The brochure should be distributed and publicised as widely as possible in order to ensure that the persons concerned can access them as soon as possible after they have lost contact with their loved one. As such, different communication and dissemination channels should be used based on the target group. It is also essential that the information be available electronically and that as many links as possible are created. In order to better reach family members, the provision of audio-visual means of information on the issue is also worth considering.

Implementation of other research projects:

A review of the literature has shown that up to now little or no research has been carried out on the effects of involuntary loss of contact and on the psychosocial needs of the family members of missing persons in the European context. It is vital that other surveys be carried out in this area not least to develop suitable investment strategies in support of the family members of missing persons. The findings gained in this report need to be supplemented and intensified by more narrowly defined questions and more homogeneous samples. The qualitative

approach has proven itself with the research group of family members of missing persons and it is recommended that it be used for future surveys.

The following research project would be helpful:

- Conduct in-depth and comparative surveys of the situation and needs of the family members of missing persons based on certain criteria (for instance, reason for the loss of contact, kinship or region of origin)
- Study the impact the filing of a search request at a tracing service has on the emotional well-being of the family members of missing persons
- Assess the stressful situations and resulting need for support after a person has been found dead or alive
- Action research on the evaluation of intervention and support strategies used
- Evaluate the intervention and support strategies developed in transcultural settings

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Persons looking for a missing loved one face huge uncertainty and are under constant strain. For some, this situation may last decades, shattering the lives of the persons concerned. In order to enhance support for the families of missing persons, the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) commissioned an internal study. In individual and group interviews, persons affected spoke of the impact the loss of contact with a loved one is having on their life. They also described the resources available and further needs to improve their situation.

The group interviewed included the following clients of the SRC Tracing Service:

- Migrants living in Switzerland who had lost contact with family members in their country of origin or during the migration process
- Persons looking for their biological mother or father
- Persons who had lost contact with a family member owing to family conflicts or for other reasons

This report outlines the results of the study and contains suggestions for the psychosocial support for families of missing persons. It is aimed both at the SRC Tracing Service and at other institutions and professionals dealing with the families of missing persons in the European context.

IM FOKUS GESUNDHEIT MIGRATION INTEGRATION	Das Schweizerische Rote Kreuz (SRK) engagiert sich seit vielen Jahren in der Grundlagen- und Projektarbeit in den Bereichen Gesundheit, Migration und Integration.
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