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Mokhnar L.I.

National University of Civil Protection of Ukraine

Diachkova O.M.

National University of Civil Protection of Ukraine

Vovk N.P.

National University of Civil Protection of Ukraine

Rudenko I.M.

National University of Civil Protection of Ukraine

Chernenko O.M.

National University of Civil Protection of Ukraine

THE PRACTICES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE PERSONNEL EXPERIENCING AMBIGUOUS LOSS

The article is devoted to the analysis of the problem of the psychological support for the State Emergency Service personnel experiencing ambiguous loss. The article analyzes the phenomenon of the ambiguous loss and identifies a number of characteristic features that significantly distinguish it from other types of loss (accompanied by a feeling of incompleteness, which creates additional emotional stress on the individual; a situation of the ambiguous loss causes the feeling of uncertainty, which hinders the adaptation process and causes a high level of stress; emotional tension caused by uncertainty affects all aspects of a person life, in particular their emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships and ability to make decisions). The paper reveals two main types of ambiguous loss: physical and psychological (physical loss occurs when a person or object is physically absent, but their emotional connection with those who are experiencing the loss remains; psychological loss occurs when a person is physically present but, due to certain circumstances, is emotionally or psychologically unavailable for interaction). The consequences of experiencing the ambiguous loss of the individual are analyzed. The specifics of psychological support of the staff of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine and family members of missing people by the psychologists (mental tutors) are revealed. The psychological support for the State Emergency Service staff experiencing the ambiguous loss is provided in accordance with the unified protocols and “Mental Tutor” technology, which ensures increased psychological effectiveness.

The psychological support for the State Emergency Service personnel, experiencing the ambiguous loss, is provided in accordance with the standardized protocols and “Mental Tutor” technology, which ensures more effective psychological assistance aimed at preserving and restoring mental health. The basic principles of psychological support (empathic support, normalization of reactions, strengthening of the internal resources, support for the adaptation process) are revealed. The forms of assistance used in the process of psychological support for the State Emergency Service personnel experiencing the ambiguous loss (individual counseling, group work, crisis intervention, psychoeducation) are identified.

Key words: loss, physical loss, psychological loss, ambiguous loss, psychological support, State Emergency Service personnel, mental tutor.

Formulation of the problem. The full-scale military invasion that has been ongoing in Ukraine since 2022 has created extremely difficult conditions for the functioning of the civil protection system. The personnel of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, the vast majority of whom are rescuers from operational units, perform their duties daily in extreme conditions – working in the rubble of destroyed buildings, dealing with the aftermath of missile strikes, helping victims and evacuating people from combat zones. Their work involves dangerous conditions, such as the risk of repeated shelling while performing their professional duties, prolonged physical exertion, lack of security guarantees and risk to their own lives and health.

In addition to physical dangers, rescuers also experience the significant emotional stress: they are confronted with the suffering, pain, and loss of the people whose lives they save. Special attention should be paid to the category of rescuers who, in addition to the usual challenges of their profession, experience the phenomenon of the ambiguous loss – situations where loved ones disappear without a trace, leaving behind emptiness, uncertainty and hope that often has no end. These emotions significantly complicate their psychological and emotional state, affecting their ability to maintain the psychological stability and perform their duties. The loss that has no definitive confirmation is the most difficult from the psychological point of view. The state of uncertainty and anticipation can lead to the emotional and psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and even the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The Unified Register of Missing Persons under Special Circumstances contains over 70,000 entries [1]. Among the personnel of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, one person is officially considered missing, but the empirical study assessing the number of the State Emergency Service personnel (personnel from twenty-four State Emergency Service departments in the regions and in Kyiv, as well as the educational institutions of the State Emergency Service system (Lviv State University of Life Safety (LSULS), National University of Civil Protection of Ukraine (NUCP), Higher Professional School of Lviv State University of Life Safety (HPS LSULS)) and the Mobile Rapid Response Rescue Center of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (MRR RC SES), it can be concluded that among the 24,795 respondents surveyed, 3,224 people, or 13%, have experienced the loss of a close friend or relative who is considered missing [4].

The ambiguous loss of the State Emergency Service personnel has the specific character, since, on the one hand, it is a direct consequence of a risky profession and on the other hand, in the context of a person going missing or the absence of official confirmation of his/her fate, the lack of any definitive information creates a situation that persists for a long time in the conditions of psychological uncertainty. This situation affects not only the relatives and friends of the missing persons, but also their colleagues, commanders and the whole organization. The absence of the official data about the fate of the missing employee leads to that fact that relatives and colleagues are in a constant state of anticipation, stress and anxiety, which complicates the process of normal functioning at both the individual and collective levels. In addition, in the situation of the ambiguous loss, there is a certain emotional incompleteness of the grieving process, since a person cannot fully accept the loss without clear identification and confirmation of the fact of death.

In the context of the State Emergency Service, this situation is more exacerbated by the peculiarities of the organization functioning, which is based on clear structures of interaction and mutual support among the employees, commanders, and subordinates. Each member of the team plays an important role in the common activities and the disappearance of one of them can upset this balance, causing additional stress and tension within the team. An additional aspect is that in the conditions of uncertainty, State Emergency Service specialists are often unable to openly discuss their experiences due to the stereotypes regarding professional resilience and internal requirements for the performance of official duties. At the same time, stress caused by the uncertainty can lead to emotional exhaustion, disruption of normal team interaction and a decline in the moral and psychological atmosphere within the organization.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The ambiguous loss is a specific phenomenon characterized by the absence of a clear conclusion to the event of loss, as well as the incomprehensibility or uncertainty of the situation in which a person is. This term “ambiguous loss” was introduced by the American researcher Pauline Boss, who defined it as a special type of loss that arises in circumstances where the absence or presence of the object of loss cannot be clearly determined [5].

The ambiguous loss has a number of characteristics that significantly distinguish it from other types of loss. First, it is accompanied by the feeling of incompleteness, which creates additional emotional

stress for the person. People often cannot fully accept the loss because they do not have enough information to comprehend it. Second, the situation of ambiguous loss causes a feeling of uncertainty, which hinders the adaptation process and causes high levels of stress. This state is exacerbated by a lack of support from the social environment, as those around them may also be unaware of the complexity of the situation. Thirdly, the emotional tension caused by the uncertainty, affects all aspects of a person life, including their emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships and decision-making ability.

P. Boss concept emphasizes that the ambiguous loss disturbs the basic adaptation processes and creates additional challenges for people experiencing such circumstances. The inability to complete the “mourning process” due to the absence of clarity hinders the acceptance of new living conditions. In her researches, the author also emphasizes the need to understand this phenomenon in order to develop effective methods of the psychological assistance and support that help reduce emotional tension and restore the psychological stability.

The ambiguous loss is a multidimensional phenomenon that can manifest itself in the various forms depending on the circumstances in which it occurs. Pauline Boss identified two main types of the ambiguous loss: physical and psychological. Each of these types has its own characteristics that determine the emotional, cognitive and behavioral impact on a person facing such a situation.

The physical loss occurs when a person or object is physically absent, but their emotional connection with those experiencing the loss remains. The most common example of this type is when a person goes missing without a trace. In such cases, the lack of information about the fate of the missing person causes a constant feeling of uncertainty, which hinders the process of emotional recovery. Other examples of physical loss include situations related to migration, military action, natural disasters, or kidnapping. A person experiencing such a loss often finds themselves in a state of dual reality, simultaneously hoping for the return of the missing person and trying to adapt to the possibility of their permanent loss [5].

The psychological loss occurs when a person is physically present but, due to certain circumstances, is emotionally or psychologically unavailable for interaction. This may be due to conditions such as illness (e.g. dementia, coma, severe mental disorders), trauma or emotional burnout. In such cases loved ones experience a sense of loss, even though the person physical presence creates the illusion of availability.

This duality causes a high level of emotional tension and uncertainty, as the person cannot accept the loss or process its emotional consequences. In addition to the two main types, there are other specific examples of ambiguous loss that are relevant in the context of the research. For example, families of rescuers or representatives of other high-risk professions often experience a sense of uncertainty associated with long business trips, danger while performing official duties or unpredictable working conditions. In such cases, the physical absence or emotional unavailability of a loved one causes tension and conflict in families and furthermore affects their psychological state.

The ambiguous loss has a complex impact on a person, affecting emotional, social, and cognitive spheres. These aspects are interrelated and can reinforce each other, creating difficult conditions for the psychological adaptation.

Task statement. The purpose of the article is to analyze the phenomenon of ambiguous loss, identify its main characteristics that distinguish it from other types of loss and examine the challenges of providing the psychological support for State Emergency Service personnel experiencing ambiguous loss.

Outline of the main material of the study. Experiencing the ambiguous loss is accompanied by the significant emotional stress. A person may experience anxiety (constant doubts, uncertainty about the future, feelings of threat), depression (decreased energy, loss of interest in usual activities, feelings of hopelessness), stress (increased emotional tension due to the inability to control the situation). These emotions and feelings can last for years if the situation remains uncertain and often require professional help to overcome them.

Besides, experiencing the ambiguous loss has serious psychological and emotional consequences for both the relatives and colleagues of the missing person. People who experience such a situation, are often in a state of chronic anxiety, accompanied by constant emotional tension. This state is caused by constant psychological tension from the need to hold two conflicting hypotheses: on the one hand, there is hope for a positive outcome (that the missing person may be alive), and on the other hand, there is the reality of loss (that the person is probably dead). This creates the situation in which individuals cannot complete the natural grieving process because they are constantly in a state of psychological uncertainty.

Among the emotions observed in victims, a wide range of reactions can be identified, including anxiety, depression, a sense of guilt, disappointment, fear and

even emotional isolation. At the same time, people may experience periods of deep depression, decreased motivation and powerlessness, as the prolonged uncertainty intensifies the feelings of helplessness and lack of control over the situation. If a person does not receive support or the opportunity to adapt to the situation, this can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that will negatively affect his/her psycho-emotional state. The impact of uncertainty on children who are experiencing the loss of their parents is a particularly important issue. For children, the lack of confirmed information can be a source of prolonged emotional distress. Children tend to have more difficulty understanding or coping with the uncertain situation because their emotional responses are much more dependent on their social environment and adult behavior patterns. In this regard, children may experience the emotional disorganization, which affects their development, ability to adapt and social interactions.

As for the State Emergency Service specialists – they may experience symptoms of the professional burnout caused by the constant stress from working in hazardous conditions and the inability to come to the terms with their losses. The high emotional tension can lead to disruption of teamwork, which significantly reduces the effectiveness of performing the official duties, while feelings of guilt and frustration can weaken the moral and psychological climate within the unit.

The psychological support for the personnel of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine and family members of missing persons is an important component of ensuring the psychological health and emotional stability in the conditions of prolonged stress and uncertainty. The principles on which this process is based are focused on providing the maximum support to victims and helping them adapt to new conditions where losses are unresolved.

To provide the psychological support and assistance for rescuers in the State Emergency Service system, a new concept and technology called “Mental Tutor” was introduced in January 2024, which operates in accordance with Order № 27 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs dated January 15, 2024 “On the approval of the Plan for the psychological support providing of the servicemen of the National Guard of Ukraine, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, police officers and specialists of the civil protection service, their family members during martial law and the professional selection of psychologists (mental tutors)”. It includes diagnosis, correction and psychological assistance for the specialists of the

State Emergency Service who have been wounded, released from captivity, as well as to family members of those who have been killed (died), are missing or are in captivity.

A mental tutor is a specialist selected from the staff of the psychologists and has the professional training in the field of the psychological trauma and acts as a mentor for the mental health support. His/her activity is aimed at providing the psychological assistance to affected specialists of the civil protection service in order to preserve or restore their physical and mental state, as well as to reduce the severity of the consequences of stressful events they have experienced.

The Mental Tutor program is implemented in accordance with the standardized protocols for the psychological work in the emotional support groups for specialists of the Ministry of Internal Affairs [2].

Among the mental tutor tasks are the psychological diagnosis, assistance in restoring constructive relationships in the family and society, restoring the adaptive capabilities of the psyche to act in the conditions of increased danger and teaching the techniques and methods of providing the first psychological aid (self-help).

The empathetic support is the main principle of the psychological support. It consists in creating a safe space for expressing emotions without judgment or evaluation. When experiencing grief, it is important to allow people to express their feelings, doubts and anxieties. This approach helps to relieve the emotional tension and provides the opportunity to feel support and understanding from others [5].

The normalization of reactions is the next important principle, which involves the explaining to victims that a wide range of emotional and behavioral reactions in the conditions of uncertainty are natural and expected. This helps to relieve feelings of guilt for experiencing the strong emotions or having reactions that may seem excessive. The normalization helps people understand that such states are part of the natural process of grieving and experiencing loss.

The strengthening of the internal resources involves working on the development of stress resistance, emotional regulation and self-help skills. This fact allows victims to maintain control over their emotions, reduce stress levels and gain confidence in their ability to cope with the difficult situations.

It is important to develop the psychological resilience, which enables people to adapt to changes in their lives and give themselves time to recover.

The adaptation process support is helping to form new life goals and adapt to a changed reality.

Experiencing the ambiguous loss inevitably leads to a change in life goals. The psychologist task is to support the victims in creation of a new concept of life that corresponds to their real circumstances. It includes assisting in the search of new goals, incentives and directions to the development.

The interdisciplinary approach involves coordinating the actions of the psychologists with other specialists, such as chaplains, social workers, medical specialists and unit commanders. Such interaction allows for the creation of comprehensive support for victims and their families, including psychological, social, and medical assistance. This ensures the integrity and effectiveness of the assistance provided.

In the process of the psychological support, various forms of assistance can be used to provide support, reduce stress and alleviate the experiences associated with the ambiguous loss.

In particular, the following forms are important:

Individual counseling is a form that provides in-depth processing of personal experiences. It involves the creation of the safe therapeutic alliance where the client can openly talk about his/her feelings, thoughts and emotions. Individual work allows to form a personalized approach to each person and takes into account his/her unique experiences.

Group work involves the creating of support groups where relatives and colleagues can share experiences, work through emotional difficulties together and reduce feelings of isolation. The support groups create a community of people who are in similar situations, which helps reduce emotional stress and create an atmosphere of mutual support.

The crisis intervention is emergency assistance provided during the exacerbation of the psycho-emotional state of victims. The crisis intervention involves responding quickly to emotional outbursts, providing first psychological aid and stabilizing the mental state of the person.

The psychoeducation is the process of learning the emotional self-regulation skills, recognizing symptoms of distress, and familiarizing oneself

with the characteristics of experiencing uncertain loss. The psychoeducation helps reduce anxiety levels, promotes the formation of adequate stress management strategies and supports resilience in the crisis situations.

The multimodal approaches use a variety of therapeutic techniques, such as art therapy, body-oriented methods and narrative therapy. They allow you to work with loss through the symbolic and metaphorical images without directly focusing on the loss itself.

Conclusions. The psychological support for State Emergency Service personnel experiencing the ambiguous loss is provided in accordance with the standardized protocols and “Mental Tutor” technology, which ensures more effective psychological assistance aimed at preserving and restoring the mental health. In conditions of prolonged stress associated with the ambiguous loss, this technology helps to reduce the severity of the psychological trauma consequences. The State Emergency Service psychologist is an important specialist in providing the psychological support to personnel and families of missing persons.

The main tasks of such specialists are to identify individuals who need the psychological assistance in a timely manner, create the emotionally safe environment for processing experiences, support commanders in establishing effective communication with subordinates and families, and prevent the professional burnout among the specialists. The psychologists should pay particular attention to cases involving families where the search process is ongoing and requires long-term, systematic support.

We see the prospects for further research on this issue in conducting the empirical assessment of the psychological consequences of experiencing the ambiguous loss by the personnel of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine and developing the psychological assistance program to overcome the psychological consequences of experiencing the ambiguous loss by the personnel of the State Emergency Service.

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Мохнар Л.І., Дячкова О.М., Вовк Н.П., Руденко І.М., Черненко О.М. ПРАКТИКА ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОГО СУПРОВОДУ ПЕРСОНАЛУ ДСНС, ЯКИЙ ПЕРЕЖИВАЄ НЕВИЗНАЧЕНУ ВТРАТУ

Статтю присвячено аналізу проблеми психологічного супроводу персоналу Державної служби України з надзвичайних ситуацій (ДСНС), який переживає невизначену втрату. У роботі проаналізовано феномен невизначеної втрати, визначено ряд характерних рис, які суттєво відрізняють її від інших видів втрат (супроводжується відчуттям незавершеності, що створює додаткове емоційне навантаження на особу; ситуація невизначеної втрати викликає відчуття невідомості, яке перешкоджає процесу адаптації та спричиняє високий рівень стресу; емоційна напруга, спричинена невизначеністю, впливає на всі аспекти життя людини, зокрема на її емоційне благополуччя, міжособистісні стосунки та здатність ухвалювати рішення). У роботі розкрито два основні типи невизначеної втрати: фізична та психологічна (фізична втрата виникає тоді, коли людина чи об'єкт фізично відсутні, але зберігається їхній емоційний зв'язок із тими, хто переживає втрату; психологічна втрата має місце тоді, коли людина фізично присутня, але внаслідок певних обставин емоційно чи психологічно недоступна для взаємодії). Проаналізовано наслідки переживання невизначеної втрати особистістю. Розкрито специфіку психологічного супроводу персоналу ДСНС та членів родин осіб, які зникли безвісти психологами (*mental tutor*). Психологічний супровід персоналу ДСНС України, який переживає невизначену втрату, здійснюється відповідно до уніфікованих протоколів та технології «*Mental Tutor*», що забезпечує підвищення ефективності психологічної допомоги, спрямованої на збереження та відновлення психічного здоров'я. Розкрито основні принципи психологічного супроводу (емпатійна підтримка, нормалізація реакцій, зміцнення внутрішніх ресурсів, підтримка процесу адаптації). Визначено форми допомоги, що використовуються у процесі психологічного супроводу персоналу ДСНС, що переживає невизначену втрату (індивідуальне консультування, групові форми роботи, кризове втручання, психоедукація).

Ключові слова: втрата, фізична втрата, психологічна втрата, невизначена втрата, психологічний супровід, персонал ДСНС, *mental tutor*.

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