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EXPERIENCING THE AMBIGUOUS LOSS AS A RISK FACTOR OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MALADAPTATION AMONG THE STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE PERSONNEL

The article presents a theoretical and analytical review of the problem of experiencing the ambiguous loss as a risk factor of psychological maladaptation among the personnel of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine.

Ambiguous loss is considered as a specific type of psychotraumatic experience that arises under the conditions of a lack of reliable information about the status of a lovely one and the impossibility of completing the grieving process. It takes the form of a prolonged, unresolved psychological process that contains a state of chronic uncertainty and emotional tension in the situations of enforced disappearance.

This paper presents the key psychological effects of ambiguous loss include anxiety, depressive states and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. These conditions are appropriately defined as psychopathological features, among which person's maladaptation occupies a leading position. Such maladaptation looks like as a natural response to the impossibility of psychological coping with the loss, rather than as a purely individual pathology.

In the professional context of State Emergency Service personnel, these manifestations look like as a significant factor in the disruption of psycho-emotional balance, reduction of adaptive resources and impairment of socio-professional possibilities.

It was found out that ambiguous loss is a systemic psychotraumatic factor that requires the separate scientific consideration. The necessity of developing the specialized approaches to psychological support for people experiencing this type of loss, as well as improving the psychological assistance in the extreme professional conditions, is substantiated.

Ключові слова: ambiguous loss, enforced disappearance, psychological maladaptation, State Emergency Service personnel, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychopathology.

Introduction. The full invasion in Ukraine has led to a wide range of losses, especially human losses. These losses have not just quantitative character but also qualitatively transform a person's world as they undermine the basic assumptions about safety, predictability and control, disrupt everyday social relationships, and reshape family roles and patterns of interaction.

In addition, the confirmed and concrete losses, ambiguous losses also

occur on a large scale in wartime conditions. They are particularly psychologically difficult due to the lack of closure and the inability to clearly determine the status of the event.

The Unified Register of Persons Missing Under the Special Circumstances contains information that more than 90,000 people, including military personnel, civilians and children, are listed as missing under the specific circumstances [15].

According to the official data, one person of the State Emergency Service is currently considered to be missed. At the same time, the results of an empirical study conducted among the State Emergency Service personnel from all twenty-four regional departments and the city of Kyiv, educational institutions of the the State Emergency Service system, indicate a substantially bigger prevalence of ambiguous loss experience in the professional environment.

In particular, among 24,795 respondents, 3,224 individuals (13%) are experiencing the loss of a lovely one who's officially considered missing [7]. These results show that experiencing the ambiguous loss constitutes a widespread psychotraumatic factor among the State Emergency Service personnel and may represent a significant determinant of psychological maladaptation within this professional group [7].

This number is not only statistical data as it also reflects a complex of socio-psychological situation in which families are simultaneously required to search for missing relatives, preserve their memory, maintain family stability, and cope with legal and administrative procedures that are often long enough and emotionally exhausting. An additional factor of psychological trauma is the informational uncertainty, contradictory reports and lack of reliable evidence, which make it impossible to form a coherent understanding of the event and thus it cause a prolonged state of ambiguity.

An analysis of recent studies and publications. L. Rybik specifies ambiguous loss as a special type of traumatic experience. Unlike traditional grief, this state is characterized by the absence of reliable information about the fate or whereabouts of a loved one and

leads to specific emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions [12].

The phenomenon of ambiguous loss is one of the most complex forms of psychological trauma as it involves a specific experience of physical loss that remains unresolved due to the paradox of ambiguity when the loved one is physically absent, but still remains psychologically present.

The study of this phenomenon began from the research of experience of family loss. The american psychologist P. Boss observed that parents who were physically present were sometimes psychologically absent [4]. This observation had important conceptual significance, as it shifted the focus from a simple "present/absent" dichotomy to more thorough understanding of presence: a person may be physically nearby, yet emotionally unavailable or physically absent while remaining psychologically embedded within the family orientation.

Later, the researchers expanded this concept, noting that the psychological absence may apply not only to parents but to any loved person who is simultaneously "within and outside the family" [8; 11], existing in a state of uncertainty that destroys the conventional perceptions of reality, belonging and social roles.

Ambiguous loss, conceptualized by P. Boss as a state in which a person lacks sufficient information about the fate or whereabouts of a loved one, generates prolonged psychological stress that does not respond to traditional grief processes [5]. This is particularly evident under the conditions of martial law, where the disappearance of military personnel and civilians becomes not only an individual tragedy but also a large-scale social phenomenon.

Over the past decades, this issue has been repeatedly studied in Western psychology (D. Barakovic, P. Boss, P. Boelen, J. Sampson, L. Lenferink, Y. Zaksh, etc.). In this side of research, ambiguous loss is not viewed as a “variation of normal grief,” but rather as a specific configuration of experience with its own mechanisms for maintaining psychological distress – from the disruption of meaning structures and chronic anxiety to family disorganization and social isolation.

According to V. Dotsenko, ambiguous loss related to the loss of family, relatives, or home may manifest through depressive states, anxiety, hopelessness, helplessness, chronic sorrow, guilt, distrust, identity disturbances, emotional ambivalence and disruption of the grieving process [6].

As a result, the prolonged persistence of these manifestations may be considered an indicator of psychological maladaptation, as they impair emotional stability, adaptive capacity and social-professional functioning, particularly among the State Emergency Service personnel exposed to chronic stress and traumatic experience.

This issue is of significant relevance to State Emergency Service personnel, whose professional activities are conducted under the conditions of high psychological influence, continuous exposure to emergencies, risk of emotional exhaustion, secondary traumatization and the requirement to maintain consistently high professional performance. In this context, the experience of ambiguous loss of a loved one constitutes an additional psychotraumatic factor that may significantly increase the risk of psychological maladaptation, manifesting in a range of psychopathological

symptoms and distractions in social and professional aspects.

At the same time, while the existing regulatory and organizational framework for psychological support within the State Emergency Service provides a general system of assistance, it does not yet include sufficiently specialized approaches or intervention algorithms specifically addressing the phenomenon of ambiguous loss as a distinct risk factor of psychological maladaptation [10].

In the contemporary conditions, ambiguous loss is accompanied by chronic anxiety, persistent psychological tension and a dissonance between cognitive expectations and emotional reality. The absence of confirmed information about the vital status of a close person disrupts the natural stages of grieving, keeping families in a “frozen” state that may last for months or even years. For many families, such situation becomes a prolonged psychological challenge that affects the emotional stability, social functioning, family roles and life strategies [1].

Because of the intensity of hostilities, the scale of destruction and numerous cases of forced displacement or the capture of civilians and military personnel, the problem of ambiguous loss in Ukraine has acquired a systemic character. It generates the significant risks for the development of depressive, anxiety, post-traumatic and stress-related reactions, as well as specific psychological states such as chronic sorrow and emotional ambivalence.

Taking into account the above mentioned, ambiguous loss should be considered as a critical risk factor for psychological maladaptation, as these manifestations disrupt emotional stability, deplete adaptive resources and impair social and professional

functioning, particularly among the State Emergency Service personnel working under the conditions of prolonged stress.

The aim of the article is theoretically examine the ambiguous loss as a risk factor of the psychological maladaptation among the specialists of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, with particular attention to its psychological effects – such as emotional ambivalence, chronic stress, identity disturbances, social maladjustment and to identify the key mechanisms underlying these processes.

Presentation of the main research material. Every person life is inevitably associated with the experiencing loss. The experience of grief is the universal aspect of human existence. It is a period of profound psychological change, transformation and the need to adapt to a reality in which a significant, valued and emotionally loved one is absent.

Ambiguous loss is a form of unresolved grief. The key characteristics of this type of loss include [1; 9; 11;13]: incompleteness, as ambiguous loss remains unresolved due to the absence of confirmation of a loved one death, leaving the individual in a state of ongoing hope for their return; ambivalence, that should be understood not as an inherent internal contradiction of personality, but as a forced psychological response to uncertainty; traumatic impact, sustained by the recurring waves of uncertainty and waiting; and external determination, meaning that the situation is conditioned by factors beyond the individual's control or “psychological strength”.

A literature review identifies ambiguous loss as one of the most complex forms of loss, as it remains unclear and psychologically unresolved due to its paradoxical nature, forcing

individuals to exist simultaneously between hope and despair. Accordingly, the researchers [3; 4; 13; 16] distinguish two primary types of ambiguous loss: physical presence with psychological absence (e.g. depression, addiction) and physical absence with psychological presence (e.g. captivity, enforced disappearance).

Based on an analysis of the researches, it can be concluded that both types of ambiguous loss may act as significant risk factors of psychological maladaptation, as they maintain emotional tension, complicate the grieving process, and negatively affect social and professional functioning.

One of the primary psychological effects of experiencing ambiguous loss is anxiety, which in this context acquires a persistent, background character [1]. For the personnel of the State Emergency Service, whose professional activity involves continuous exposure to extreme conditions, high responsibility, and operational uncertainty, such anxiety is further intensified by the overlap of professional stressors and personal loss.

It was determined that anxiety associated with ambiguous loss is not limited to reactions to discrete stressors, but reflects a prolonged state of uncertainty, accompanied by the heightened activation of the nervous system and increased reactivity to both external and internal motivators. Regarding to our study, this condition acts as a significant risk factor for the psychological maladaptation, contributing to emotional instability, reduced stress tolerance, and impairments in the professional functioning under the high-demand conditions [11].

Anxiety is closely linked to depressive symptomatology, which in the context of ambiguous loss has a

specific character that differs from the classical depression. In this case, depression arises not only as a reaction to the loss itself, but primarily as a consequence of the inability to grieve, make sense of, and bring closure to it [1; 11].

A significant component of depressive symptomatology is guilt, which may be directed both toward the past (imagined mistakes or “insufficient” efforts in searching) and toward the present – such as the inability to allow oneself to live, feel joy, or plan for the future under conditions of uncertainty. The feeling of guilt intensifies rumination, meaning intrusive and repetitive thoughts about the circumstances of the disappearance and alternative scenarios of events, which in turn deepens depressive symptoms and complicates adaptation.

The psychological effect of ambiguous loss, in addition to prolonged impairment of the grieving process, include anxiety and depressive states, intrusive thoughts, feelings of guilt, the phenomenon of “postponed life,” and social isolation. This condition is caused by the absence of clear closure of the loss, which prevents full grieving and may lead to chronic psychological difficulties, such as avoidance of social contact and challenges in resuming normal daily functioning [11].

A certain group of psychological consequences includes symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which develop as a result of prolonged exposure to an unresolved threat situation. Research indicates that ambiguous loss may cause PTSD-like symptoms, including intrusive memories, avoidance of reminders of the loss, emotional numbing and heightened the psychophysiological reactivity [9].

The maintenance of anxiety, depressive and post-traumatic effects in the context of ambiguous loss is supported by the specific cognitive and behavioral mechanisms, among which rumination and emotional avoidance play a key role. Rumination is expressed as intrusive focusing on possible scenarios of events, continuous searching for causes, and attempts to construct alternative explanations, whereas avoidance is characterized by the suppression of the emotional processing of the loss and withdrawal from the social interaction [11].

In this regard, these mechanisms can be interpreted as significant determinants of psychological maladaptation, as they impair adaptive coping, disrupt emotional regulation processes, and contribute to the deterioration of social and professional functioning under the conditions of prolonged uncertainty.

Another maladaptive manifestation is avoidance, which can occur both as behavioral avoidance, such as deliberately avoiding activities or places associated with the loss, and as emotional avoidance, expressed through the suppression of feelings or escape from reality via work or other activities [1; 9].

Ambiguous loss resulting from the enforced disappearance should be understood not merely as a singular loss event, but as a prolonged traumatic process that rise a specific combination of psychological consequences. These include anxiety, depressive states and PTSD-like symptoms, which represent core psychopathological manifestations of ambiguous loss and simultaneously constitute indicators of the psychological maladaptation [11].

Their development is determined not by pre-existing individual psychopathology, but by the objective impossibility of achieving the psychological closure under the conditions of prolonged uncertainty. So, the described manifestations reflect a state of maladaptive functioning characterized by the impaired emotional regulation, reduced coping capacity and difficulties in social and professional adaptation.

This conceptualization emphasizes the need for systematic empirical assessment of ambiguous loss-related reactions as markers of psychological maladaptation, as well as the development of specialized approaches to psychological support and assistance for people experienced such traumatic situations.

It was singled out that the current regulatory and legal framework of the psychological support of the State Emergency Service psychologists regarding the personnel, experiencing the ambiguous loss, is of a general nature [10].

The current regulatory documents of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Emergency Service of Ukraine outlines only general organizational principles and does not recognize ambiguous loss as a separate direction of psychological support, thereby highlighting the need for the development of specialized methodological standards, corresponding protocols and algorithms in accordance with levels of psychotraumatic influence and high risk of psychological maladaptation [10].

Conclusions. Ambiguous loss refers to the specific prolonged psychotraumatic process that significantly increases the risk of psychological maladaptation among the

personnel of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine. Its key psychological manifestations, such as anxiety, depressive states, post-traumatic stress symptoms, emotional ambivalence and chronic stress, reflect not isolated psychopathological conditions, but a systemic disruption of adaptive functioning caused by the persistent uncertainty and the impossibility of achieving psychological closure.

The analysis proved that cognitive and behavioral mechanisms, particularly rumination and emotional avoidance, play a key role in the maintenance and chronicity of maladaptive states, further exacerbating emotional dysregulation and harming the social and professional functioning. With regard to the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, these effects are intensified by the continuous working in the conditions of emergencies, high work demands and accumulated traumatic load.

It should be noted that the current regulatory and organizational framework for the psychological support within the State Emergency Service provides only general provisions and does not adequately address ambiguous loss as a distinct risk factor of psychological maladaptation. Existing approaches are primarily oriented toward acute stress reactions and short-term psychological assistance, which limits their effectiveness in the conditions of prolonged uncertainty characteristic of ambiguous loss.

Thus, there is a clear need for the development of specialized methodological approaches, evidence-based intervention protocols and structured psychological support systems that account for the temporal dynamics and specific features of ambiguous loss. Strengthening the system of psychosocial support for the State

Emergency Service of Ukraine personnel should include early identification of maladaptive manifestations and

integration of long-term psychological support to reduce the risk of chronic psychological maladaptation.

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ПЕРЕЖИВАННЯ НЕВИЗНАЧЕНОЇ ВТРАТИ ЯК ЧИННИК ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОЇ ДЕЗАДАПТАЦІЇ ПЕРСОНАЛУ ДСНС

У статті здійснено теоретико-аналітичний огляд з проблеми переживання невизначеної втрати як чинника психологічної дезадаптації персоналу Державної служби України з надзвичайних ситуацій.

Невизначена втрата розглядається як особливий різновид психотравмального досвіду, що виникає за умов відсутності достовірної інформації щодо статусу близької людини та неможливості завершення процесу горювання. У випадках насильницького зникнення така втрата набуває характеру тривалого, незавершеного психологічного процесу, який підтримує стан хронічної невизначеності та емоційного напруження.

На підставі аналізу результатів наукових розвідок з'ясовано, що основними психологічними проявами невизначеної втрати є тривожність, депресивні стани та симптоматика посттравматичного стресового розладу. Ці стани доцільно розглядати як

психопатологічні прояви, серед яких провідне місце посідає дезадаптація, що виникає як закономірна реакція на неможливість психологічного завершення втрати.

У професійному середовищі персоналу ДСНС зазначені прояви виступають вагомим чинником порушення емоційної рівноваги, зниження адаптаційних ресурсів та ускладнення соціально-професійного функціонування.

Невизначена втрата постає як системний психотравмувальний фактор, що потребує окремого наукового осмислення. Обґрунтовано доцільність розроблення спеціалізованих підходів до психологічного супроводу осіб, які переживають цей вид втрати, а також удосконалення психологічної підтримки в умовах екстремальної професійної діяльності.

Ключові слова: невизначена втрата, насильницьке зникнення, психологічна дезадаптація, ДСНС, тривожність, депресія, посттравматичний стресовий розлад, психопатологія.

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