

Hidden loss and the impact on the couple

Australian 50th Anniversary conference October 7th, 2023

Loss is an experience, unavoidable and painful for us all. How we process it has implications for our mental health. One of my most loved papers of Freud's is his 1917 paper Mourning and Melancholia, which I expect may be the case for many. As well as this paper being part of Freud's developing psychoanalytic theory, he understands loss at a deep level, both as an ordinary experience - one that can be worked through over time and recovered from through the process of mourning or as a complex psychological problem leading to depression (melancholia). He understood that loss was a many varied thing, he said,

“Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal or so on” (1917, p. 243).

This statement seems particularly important and helpful in therapeutic work since the loss the patient, couple or family experience is not always obvious, but is nonetheless profound and in many causes is an important factor behind presenting symptoms.

In this paper I want to explore how loss, particularly unmourned loss, can be become hidden in the unconscious of the couple's relationship. The unmourned loss exerts an unseen influence on the couple's relating and relationship.

For the intimate adult couple there are tangible and intangible losses that they may encounter. The tangible losses we are probably all familiar with in our practice, though these are not always what the couple are presenting with. For example, a couple presented to me recently with one of the partners having had an affair, it was only after several weeks of therapy that I heard about a miscarriage 6 month's previously and the unexpected death of a close family member.

Some of the more tangible losses are:

- 1)The loss of a child or pregnancy

This can be through miscarriage, stillbirth or through unsuccessful IVF and infertility, the termination of a pregnancy or early death of a child. There is loss involved in discovering the child has severe physical, mental, or emotional problems. The child is not the one imagined, may place huge demands on the parents, or be hard to love. There is also the loss of a grown child through estrangement or suicide.

2) The loss of the partner, parent, or family member

This can be death through illness, accident, or suicide, or through the ending of the relationship.

3) As well as these more tangible losses, being part of a couple, in itself, inevitably involves loss. For example, there is a crucial loss to be managed when the couple have to relinquish the 'in love' state or idealised view of themselves as a couple to something more reality based, and there are losses (as well as obvious gains) with the arrival of children and also with ageing and declining health. How these ordinary losses are managed depends on the need to hold on to the illusion and the capacity to manage disillusionment. I will comment later, on loss, change and creativity in a couple relationship.

There are in my experience several ways that loss can be hidden in a couple relationship:

1) Through the couple's defensive projective system – in which one partner carries a shared loss which is sealed off and not available to be brought into the relationship to mourn.

2) Sometimes very early unmourned losses in relation to the primary object and the Oedipal situation are repressed and then re-cathected in the couple relationship. An example of this is when the early years of child rearing leads one or both partners to feel abandoned by the other and this reactivates the early loss of the primary object when faced with the Oedipal situation. If this was not worked through early on, (and it is probably only ever partially worked through), it may resurface in relation to the current situation.

Or it might be that for some the idealised ‘in love state’ is hard to relinquish because it has functioned as a version of the mother infant symbiosis which may have been absent early on. In the case of a couple separating, some partners find this particularly difficult to recover from because the relationship has functioned in a way to cover over profound early loss, which then reappears and amplifies the current loss in disturbing ways. A feeling of grievance can sometimes ensue.

3) Thirdly, ordinary losses in the life cycle of the couple are often not recognised as losses but seen as problems in the relationship, thus there is no mourning process but a feeling of there being something wrong with the relationship. There is the loss of the phantasy about the relationship. As Vorchheimer argues,

“People not only fall in love with partners, but with the narcissistic representation of their togetherness, their love. Therefore, couples do not need an actual loss to occur in order to have an experience of perceived loss in relation to their link. Insofar as illusions can only maintain a temporary hold, the occurrence of certain everyday events can become a manifestation of the loss of their shared inaugural illusion” (2019, p.132).

I will give some clinical material as examples of these different hidden manifestations of loss.

The couple projective system

To describe the first situation, I need to say something about the couple’s projective system. The idea of a couple’s projective system developed early in Tavistock approach. Henry Dicks coined the term ‘joint marital personality’. He talked about the idea of,

“Unconscious complementariness, a kind of division of function by which each partner supplied part of a set of qualities, the sum of which created a complete dyadic unit. This joint personality or integrate, enabled each half to rediscover lost aspects of their primary object relations, which they had split off or repressed, and which they were, in their involvement with the spouse, re-experiencing by projective identification (Dicks, 1967, p. 69).

Dicks is describing what has been called by others as a developmental projective system in which the couple relationship can be a powerful fulcrum for reworking earlier unmetabolised experience - internal object relationships, internal conflicts, or unrepresented primitive experience which resurface in different forms later in life.

This is because these parts of the self are then lived with *in* the other, the partner unconsciously agreeing to carry these parts of the other on behalf of the relationship. The projected parts, lived with in the other, as they become less feared by the projector, may increase empathy in the relationship and further the psychic development of each partner. As Woodhouse describes,

“Developmental (and therefore therapeutic) potential lies in the fact that. what is feared and rejected in the internal world, and is located in the person of the partner, is not lost but it is ‘lived with’. It is therefore available experientially and may be assimilated”. (Woodhouse, 1990, p. 104)

This ‘lived with’ nature of a couple’s projective system is experientially very different in a relationship from that of a more defensive projective system, one that can be quite rigid and controlling, each partner going to considerable lengths to keep the unwanted parts of the self in the other.

I will give an example of a concrete loss experienced by a young couple that became hidden in their relationship. They unconsciously used their relationship to avoid the pain of the loss. But in this process their development as a couple was stuck. At a certain point in the therapy, the loss emerged in quite a shocking way, released from the grip of their defensive projective system as I will try and convey.

Example 1: Olivia and Jack

A recent loss defended against in the couple relationship, later becoming available to be mourned.

Olivia and Jack came for therapy because they felt their relationship was stuck, they didn’t know how to move forward together or if they should *be* together.

They had been together since university and were now in their early 30's and thought they needed to decide. They were a successful couple, both had jobs in the same financial corporation. They had moved to London 2 years previously for Olivia to take up an excellent job opportunity and Jack was similarly successful a few months later.

Three months into their once weekly therapy, the session started with Olivia saying she wanted to pick up from last week's session, and Jack said he had "forgotten" what they had talked about. In the previous session, they had shared something that had been kept from the therapy until that point. Two years ago, when they moved to London, they had "left behind" Olivia's younger, schizophrenic brother, Al, in their hometown in the north of England. In the early years of their relationship, they had both helped Al through various crises and Jack's willingness to join her in this was one of the things that attracted Olivia to him. Tragically, a month after they arrived in London, Al committed suicide. Having managed to talk about this, Olivia was angry that Jack had 'forgotten'. Jack responded somewhat defensively by saying that he thought Olivia would want to talk about what had upset her over the last day or so. He explained that his sister had been staying with them, and she and Jack had talked about Al. This upset Olivia and she felt angry with Jack and his sister for "raking over it" again. Olivia talked about being angry with them for a while, and I felt she was very conflicted, both wanting and not wanting to talk about Al. I had the sense that her anger with Jack and her sister was a diversion away from her feelings of enormous sadness and guilt. When I interpreted this, Olivia responded in a very matter-of-fact way. They had needed to get on with their careers and they couldn't have known that Al would do this. Jack listened, but didn't say anything, and became noticeably quiet. When I commented on this, he responded by asking Olivia if she really wanted to know what he thought about it. She said she did, and he told her that he thought they had done a very bad thing, they had not thought it through properly. She was shocked by his response and then became very upset and started sobbing. Gradually she was able to get in touch with how badly she too felt about "leaving Al behind".

As we came to understand it over several sessions, Olivia had projected her own "bad" feelings into Jack, and because he was more able to live with this feeling of having done something "so bad", these feelings, projected into him, didn't get lost. Now at this point in the therapy and the development of their relationship,

she was able to acknowledge that this was her feeling too. At the same time, it seemed that Jack was no longer able to carry the double dose of guilt that he had unconsciously protected Olivia from.

Later in the session, I interpreted that just as Jack felt there was a potentially understanding figure in his sister, and perhaps in me, he had also been more able than Olivia to live with these “bad feelings” in himself. This helped Olivia to feel that she could now get in touch with her guilt about Al, but also start to work through this and together with Jack, to mourn him.

For this couple, the defensive nature of their projective system was permeable and open to change. In most relationships, there is a defensive and developmental tension – a wish to keep parts of the self-located in the other, but also a wish to keep in close proximity to those aspects with the possibility of reintroduction. And sometimes a defensive projective system can support the couple as with Jack and Olivia. But for some time, Jack had to carry a difficult unprocessed experience on behalf of them both, until they could both face it and begin to work through it together.

The next phase of our work together centred on the loss of Al. I felt very affected by this tragic loss, which I took as *them* fully connecting with it. After some months I noticed something changing in the couple, they started to talk about a future together and gradually this was described with some excitement. I even had the fantasy that Olivia would find herself unexpectedly pregnant! This didn't happen but I saw this countertransference as some creativity coming into being.

Unfortunately, a couple projective system does not always work in this therapeutic way. Sometimes a more defensive process is at play in which unwanted or unmetabolised part of the self and self-experience are projected into the other and the couple function in such a way to keep these parts located there.

My second example is of a concrete loss for one woman, Anna whose husband left her. This loss was extremely difficult to mourn. I suggest the reason for this is that the relationship, up until it fell apart, had protected Anna from a very early loss and that the current loss reactivated it.

Example 2: Anna

Early loss defended against in the couple projective system and reactivated later.

Anna, aged 50, a scientist working in the field of cancer research, presented to me in a state of utter shock and distress when her husband revealed an affair that had been going on and off for many years with a woman over 20 years younger. Soon after the revelation of the affair he left Anna. The couple were childless and after two years of therapy with Anna, she reported that her ex-husband's new partner was pregnant. Although Anna reported a tumultuous relationship with her ex-husband, as his angry moods often fueled by heavy drinking, were unpredictable and overwhelming for her, she felt overall the relationship was good, and she never thought he would leave her. The impact of this separation felt like an utter abandonment and made Anna feel ill, paranoid, and unsafe. It was very hard to work through in an ordinary way, with feelings of anger, and sadness; she felt a sense of grievance.

I met with Anna 3 times a week. During that time, I heard accounts of Anna's early life, some she remembered, others she heard about from her 10 years older brother and from her aunt. She was an unexpected child, born prematurely and with jaundice, that meant she spent several weeks in an incubator. By all accounts her mother was unprepared and ill equipped to deal with this fragile baby and could not provide the containment of an ordinary mother. Her parent's marriage had been unstable since the birth of her brother and with the arrival of Anna the marriage broke apart. Her mother found the visits to Anna in the hospital distressing and despite the aunt's support, she did not visit frequently.

Anna describes a mother who was able to provide very limited containment. When she was 8 and fell and broke her arm, she remembers her mother crying on the way to hospital while she tried to comfort her mother.

The way that Anna presented to me now was like the small infant her – she woke in the morning, alone and terrified, sometimes paranoid, fearing intrusions from the outside world that threatened to overwhelm her. She felt anguished that I could not just take away this feeling.

In this situation we can see how loss – in this case the loss of a partner, is for some very difficult to recover from because it affects that person's inner core. Being able to work through loss depends on how loss has been worked through earlier in life. In Anna's case, she was I believe, left to manage loss (of her primary objects) at a stage when she was totally ill equipped to do so. She then set about trying to establish a life in which she would not be abandoned, she absorbed herself in her research and attached herself to her husband, as someone who in her mind, would never leave.

Anna was attracted to her future husband because he seemed so self- assured, even if moody, and she felt she could rely on him to deal with the outside world. Anna, I believe, clung on to the idea of the omnipotent mother, represented by the incubator and projected into her husband.

I imagine that he might in fact have had quite low self-esteem and was bolstered by Anna's perception of him, and projection into him, of her own capacities, allowing him to metaphorically grow big, while she became small, but felt safe.

This was a very defensive unconscious arrangement. One suspects if the husband had not broken free of it, Anna would have remained relatively free of her anxieties. When her husband left her, she felt this safety was ripped away from her and she was re traumatized.

In his paper *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud postulated that for the mourner the object was lost, whereas for the melancholic it is the loss of part of oneself, due to the narcissistic identification with the object. Keogh reminds us that "in such a narcissistic internal world, the lost object ...becomes transformed into a lost (split off) part of the self/ego. It then becomes subject to the grievances about the lost object" (2019, p.19).

In contrast if there is more capacity for psychic separateness the mourning process can eventually get underway. It is not that there won't be anger, pain, sadness but there is likely to be a greater capacity to come to terms with the reality of the other's separate and different feelings about the relationship. Although there is a shared history of good and bad experiences together, one partner feels differently at this point from the other. In the process of letting go, part of the psychic work that occurs is the reconfiguration of the couple's

projective system. Parts of the other that have been held by the self can over time be returned. Parts of the self, held by the other, might need to be taken back.

An important part of the mourning process is the working through of the depression in the face of the loss. Initially everything is felt to be lost, nothing remains. But the gradual impact of reality reveals that what is lost is the fantasy of the future and that can be mitigated by the rediscovery of the shared past in the form of memories. Grieving individuals will often say, as they begin to work through this process, that it feels as if the lost one is alive inside them. It is this discovery that helps the bereaved to adjust.

There is a problem, however, for the ending of a couple relationship when the individuals had distorted the reality of their past by, for example, a projective system that felt constraining rather than developmental. These dynamics may have operated throughout their relationship to distort the reality of the coupling, tensions or differences being denied and replaced by a false appearance. For couples like this, there is no compensation for the loss of the future relationship to be found in memories of the past because these are now revealed to have been untrue. It is the authenticity of the loving link revealed in memories that provides a balance to the loss. Where the memories are seen to be false, there is no authentic truth, and the loss of the future is increased by the loss of the past as well.

Example 3:

Amy and Dave: Infidelity as a manic defence against traumatic loss

This third example is taken from a response I gave to Shelley Nathans paper 'Infidelity as a manic defence', published in the book she edited *Couples on the Couch 2* (2023). Nathans thesis is that for many couples who present with an infidelity, there is, in the background an unmourned loss. The unmourned loss in the case Nathans describes, is of a baby who died unexpectedly during delivery, the second child of a couple Amy & Dave. The couple were unable to grieve this loss, Dave had an affair and then a replacement child, a daughter, was born a year later.

Dave identified himself as the “teenage man”, feeling oppressed by supporting the family financially and experiencing Amy as demanding and controlling when at home. Dave’s mother had been ill and unavailable when he was young, and his family and school life were strict and draconian. He felt Amy started to embody these restrictive and cold earlier object relationships.

Amy had felt isolated as a child and being determined not to repeat this with her own children, she devoted herself to her son, and by doing so, met some of her own emotional needs. She also grew angry and resentful of Dave’s “freedom” and withdrew from Dave emotionally and sexually. His unavailability also repeated her earlier experience. Already in this account we can see losses experienced by each partner in their childhood.

In my response to the paper, I highlighted aspects of the given material that might point to very early losses particularly the early Oedipal loss which again may be unmourned. Analytic work with individuals and couples reveals that loss is layered and that later losses build on earlier loss. By understanding and working with the intensity of feelings associated with the current losses in the here and now, there can be, through the *après coup*, a further working through of the earlier loss.

The experience of loss in the early Oedipal situation, described by Klein as in the first months of life, is hard to metabolize at the time, thus it is probably only ever partially worked through. The falling in love state of mind and the re-finding of, and ultimate loss of, the ideal object, provides the conditions within which this earlier loss, can be further worked through from a position of greater ego strength and maturity. However, the feelings re-evoked add intensity to current experiences and the current experience rekindles the earlier raw loss.

Elise describes this *après coup* aspect in relation to the Oedipal experience,

“I see in Oedipal betrayal a subjective experience of temporality where meaning travels backward and suffuses one’s object-relational past, creating a new history that is now personally registered (though not “remembered”) as immensely painful.” (Elise, 2021, p.690).

This helps us to understand why infidelity in particular has such a deep unconscious resonance and why it can be hard to work through and recover from. As Amy conveyed in the initial phone call to the therapist, “It feels like the world has been unalterably changed and it is impossible to get her bearings” (Nathans, 2013, p.59). Such primitive feelings might also be experienced in the shock of discovering one’s primary object does not only exist in a symbiotic union with the self but has another life outside one’s orbit.

The Oedipal dynamics of loss, exclusion and betrayal are felt painfully by Amy in the affair, but this was present for both and problematic in their relationship before this occurred. Amy already felt excluded by Dave’s life outside the home with work and friends, Dave felt excluded by Amy’s relationship with their son. At the point whereby the couple might have grieved together the loss of their child and deepened their relationship, they had already lost the other as a reliable, available presence. Disillusionment crashed in on this relationship as Amy became the Harlow’s monkey wire mother for Dave and Dave became the abandoning parent for Amy.

The longing for an ideal object can be more urgent when this was not provided earlier on, or if the Oedipal disillusionment comes at a point when there had not been a sufficient internalisation of a good object, one that will help in the working through of the depressive position.

Each turned to another ‘ideal’ object, Dave to the “much younger, single woman who had no obligations and was always ready to meet him at a moment’s notice” (Nathans 2023, p.70.) and Amy sought retreat and consolation in the dyadic idealised relationship with her first-born son.

Couple psychoanalytic theory suggests that within the conscious choice of partner there are significant unconscious elements in a couple’s attraction to one another. We can imagine that this couple recognised in each other a core experience of a lack of emotional contact, aloneness, and isolation. They may have unconsciously sought to create a different kind of relationship together in which they would be emotionally available for each other, just as Amy sought to be for their children. The recognition, at a deep level, of difficult shared earlier experience may have provided them with a developmental possibility to work this through instead of repeating it in their own relationship. One wonders if this might have been possible had they not been confronted with a traumatic loss of

their baby that exacerbated their vulnerabilities? We don't know, but Nathans feeling is that this couple did not have the psychic structure of sufficient depressive position capacity to work through loss without help.

For some couples, particularly if they are spared traumatic loss, the unresolved Oedipal situation is further worked through and strengthened in different ways, for example, through managing ordinary disappointment, inclusion and exclusion, acceptance of the other's and one's own good and bad parts, and in a deepening loving bond towards a 'real' other.

Loss, difference, and creativity

In this last part of my paper, I want to return to the idea of ordinary loss and how couples have to give up what I often refer to as the 'in love state' and more specifically that which Vorchheimer calls the couple's "shared inaugural illusion". Some couples may try tenaciously to hold on to the illusion but this, along with other changes, becomes increasingly more difficult in an intimate relationship.

George Elliot, in her classic novel, Middlemarch said, "Marriage is so unlike anything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings" (quoted by Cohen in the Guardian, 2021, p.22).

Without the defence of narcissistic illusion or turning a blind eye, the other's "nearness" in an intimate relationship brings the discovery that they are a challenging mixture of things. Cohen suggests the essential paradox of intimacy is,

"That in intensifying our closeness to another, we not only make them more familiar to us; we come alive to their strangeness and irreducible difference" (2021, p.23).

Losses in the couple's life cycle, which might go unnoticed and yet affect the relationship, sometimes lead to the feeling that there is something wrong with the relationship – the excitement has gone, the sex isn't as frequent, becomes more routine and is less fun, the partners don't like each other, or at least negative aspects of the other that each had turned a blind eye to, are now in full

focus. And of course, it can lead to trying to re-find these illusory feelings with another person.

It is not always like this. In many relationships, the partners can manage these transitions, even though at times it can feel very rocky between them. Such couples have a greater capacity to manage loss, built up from having had the experience of being contained when earlier losses presented, especially the inevitable loss that occurs in the Oedipal situation. When loss can be faced and worked through, important developments can take place as the 'new' elements of the other interact with the psyche of each partner. There is some freedom from projections and narcissistic dynamics.

Britton points out that Kleinian theory as it has developed,

" Implies that the depressive position is no final resting place, that leaving the security of depressive-position coherence for a new round of fragmented, persecuting uncertainties is necessary for development. The only alternative to continuous development is regression; in a world of flux an attempt to stand still produces a retreat. Yesterday's depressive position becomes tomorrow's defensive organisation" (1998, p.73)

The process of disillusionment is lived out in the everyday life of the couple. The other is revealed as not all they were imagined to be, or who we thought we needed them to be. They can meet some of our needs but are unable or choose not to meet others.

The loss that comes with disillusionment is also the point that new developments can take place in a couple relationship. The otherness of the other can lead to new discoveries for the self and creative possibilities in the relationship.

Conclusion

For any couple, there is a delicate balance between how much loss has been worked through early in each partner's life and what internal psychic structures are in place; how far the couple have progressed in their psychic development together; and what life events they are faced with, especially if they are traumatic in nature.

If there is major unresolved loss in the partner's or the couple's early experience, this will always be a fuel that could be thrown onto the fire of a current loss. In the examples I have given one can see how in the case of Amy & Dave their shared early loss, and the traumatic current loss, could not be metabolised and they became estranged and abandoning objects for each other.

In the case of Anna, I felt that the separation from her husband led to a re-traumatisation of her early loss. This early loss had been hidden and protected against in an unconscious co-created projective system. It was only when the current loss occurred, her husband leaving her, that the earlier loss was revealed. Without the couple projective system to contain it, Anna was thrown back to an early traumatic situation.

The example of Jack and Olivia I find interesting in the way it illustrates both the defensive and the potentially developmental aspect of a couple's projective system. There was something unbearable for Olivia about the loss of AI, in a particular the guilt and feeling of badness. Fortunately, she had chosen someone in Jack who was more able to bear those feelings on behalf of each of them, at least for a while. In the process of therapeutic containment, a moment arrived when Jack was ready to share what he had contained on their behalf and Olivia was able to receive it. Without their awareness this unmourned loss had prevented their development as a creative couple.

Traumatic loss can be part of a couple's experience and ordinary loss will always be so. If a couple can manage the experiences of loss and mourn them, then they reconfigure their relationship and create new ways of being together. I am not suggesting this is an easy process.

A creative couple relationship often exists in a place between the paranoid schizoid position and the depressive position. As Britton says, as an old depressive position breaks down, the form of a new one is "not only unknown but unimaginable at this point" (1998, p. 73). A creative couple relationship involves working through loss and that involves change. There is an awareness of what might not be possible now (even though it might have before), feel secure enough to allow it to come apart, and confident enough in the relationship to

create something new. And this happens sometimes in big ways but more often, in small ways, many many times in a creative couple relationship.

References

Britton, R. (1998). *Belief and Imagination. Explorations in Psychoanalysis*. Routledge: London & New York.

Cohen, J. (2021) *The Guardian Review*, Sunday March 2021, Issue no. 165

Dicks, H. V. (1967). *Marital Tensions. Clinical Studies towards a Psychological Theory of Interaction*. London: Karnac. (Reprinted 1993).

Elise, D. (2021) The danger in deception: oedipal betrayal and the assault on truth. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 60(4) 679 - 705.

Freud, S. (1917) Mourning and Melancholia. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14:237-258

Keogh, T. (2019) Psychoanalytic understandings of loss and their relevance to couples and families. In: T. Keogh & C. Gregory-Roberts *Psychoanalytic approaches to loss: Mourning, melancholia and couples*. Routledge: London & New York.

Morgan, M. Discussion of infidelity as a manic defence In: S. Nathans (Ed) *More about Couples on the Couch: Approaching psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy from an expanded perspective*. Routledge: London & New York.

Nathans, S. (2023) (Ed) *More about couples on the couch: Approaching psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy from an expanded perspective*. Routledge: London & New York

Nathans, S. (2023) Infidelity as a manic defence. In: S. Nathans (Ed) *More about Couples on the Couch: Approaching psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy from an expanded perspective*. Routledge: London & New York.

Vorchheimer, M. (2015). Understanding the loss of understanding. *Paper presented at the IPA Congress, Boston*.

Woodhouse, D. (1990). The Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies: Evolution of a marital agency. In: C. Clulow (Ed.), *Marriage: Disillusion and Hope* (pp. 69–119). Karnac: London.