



Justice
Families & Friends
of Missing Persons

Missing people: A guide for family members and service providers

Produced by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit
NSW Department of Justice

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Missing people: A guide for family members and service providers

Foreword	5
Introduction	7
About missing	9
Definition and statistics	9
Groups at risk of going missing	9
Reasons people go missing	10
The needs of families.....	10
Chapter 1: When someone is first missing.....	11
How you might feel.....	11
What helps: Looking after yourself when someone is first missing	11
How to tell other family members	13
Talking to children and young people.....	13
Chapter 2: The police investigation.....	15
What to expect.....	15
The search.....	16
Alternative search options.....	18
Non-police tracing services.....	19
Social media and other websites.....	20
Chapter 3: The nature of ambiguous loss.....	23
Ambiguous loss	23
Chapter 4: If missing continues	27
Living with 'not knowing'	27
The ongoing focus.....	27
The wheel of thoughts.....	28
The emotional impact.....	29
The nature of grief.....	31
Changes in individual's core ideas and beliefs (alterations in systems of meaning).....	31
The social impact.....	32

The impact on families	32
Changes in relationships.....	32
Community responses to missing	34
Access to support	35
Sleep difficulties and health changes.....	35
Comments from families on their experience of living with missing	37
Chapter 5: What can help if missing continues	39
Taking care of yourself	39
Adjusting expectations you may have of yourself	39
Taking time out.....	40
Returning to a routine.....	40
Processing what has happened	41
Maintaining relationships.....	42
Maintaining the connection with your missing person	44
Support from health professionals and services	45
Families and Friends of Missing Persons Groups.....	46
What can help during difficult times	47
Raising awareness in the community.....	47
Events for families and friends.....	48
Chapter 6: Other issues to consider	49
The media.....	49
Legal and financial issues.....	50
The coronial inquest	50
Collection of DNA evidence.....	52
Chapter 7: Possible outcomes and issues to consider	55
When a missing person is found alive	55
When reuniting is not possible	56
When a missing person is not found alive	56
Messages of hope	57
References	59
Appendix A: Taking care of yourself when someone goes missing.....	61
Appendix B: Does a work colleague have someone missing?.....	63
Appendix C: FFMPU publications	65

I am very pleased to introduce *Missing people: A guide for family members and service providers*. The book provides information for family members who are faced with the unfamiliar and difficult task of knowing where to start and how to respond to the many questions that arise when a loved one is missing.

I hope too that service providers will share this information to help reduce the loneliness and increase the knowledge available to those who live with missing and those who support them.

I would like to thank all involved in the development and publication of this unique resource – the FFMPU team and the service providers who come into contact with the families of the missing. Most importantly, I acknowledge and thank the family members who shared their experiences, and trusted the FFMPU team with their words.



Ms Mahashini Krishna
A/Commissioner of Victims Rights

Missing people: A guide for family members and service providers has been developed by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, Victims Services, NSW Department of Justice. The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) was established in 2000 and is the only service in Australia specifically set up to provide counselling, support and practical assistance to those affected by the loss of a missing person. FFMPU is committed to improving the knowledge and understanding of issues related to missing people, and increasing awareness of the experience and impact on those left behind when a loved one is missing.

In the community, the subject of missing people and the impact on those left behind is little understood and rarely talked about. The initial search is often the part of the experience that is most reported. There is sometimes limited understanding about missing persons' issues and the experience of the families left behind.

There can be misconceptions about who goes missing and why they're missing. Families report feeling misunderstood by the community and service providers. They experience a loss that is traumatic and sometimes unresolved. Families often speak of the challenge of living with 'not knowing' what has happened, what the future holds or where to turn for help. In this book, we address the issues that may arise for those who are left behind when a loved one is missing.

The information provided in this book is based on the knowledge of the team at FFMPU, information gained from other organisations and research findings, into the emotional and psychosocial impact of missing. It was written by the counsellors at FFMPU in consultation with family members who have someone missing in their lives, and draws on their lived experience. Their comments are incorporated throughout the book and provide insights into the different aspects of missing. These families generously and willingly shared their experiences, reflections, and time to make the book possible. We thank them for their generosity, patience and ongoing support.

This book assists service providers who come into contact with families of missing people to better understand the difficulties they face, through the insights the families have provided. We hope too that the book raises awareness and increases understanding of missing persons' issues across the community.



Liz Davies
FFMPU Coordinator

Definition and statistics

A missing person is an individual 'whose current whereabouts are unknown and there are concerns for their safety and wellbeing.'

The estimated number of people reported missing in Australia to police and other search agencies annually is approximately 35,000. The majority of missing people are located within a short period of time. The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police estimates that there are 1600 'long-term' missing people cases in Australia.

Researchers estimate that for each person who goes missing on average 12 people will be affected.

Groups at risk of going missing

'Missing' can happen to anyone, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, spirituality or age; however, researchers have identified some groups of people who are more at risk of going missing:

- Young people under 18 years of age, account for over half of the missing persons' reports in Australia. Females (13 to 17 years) are identified as a high-risk group.
- People experiencing mental health difficulties. Mental health difficulties may impact on a person's problem-solving abilities and their ability to cope with everyday living.
- Older people with dementia or memory loss, may be at increased risk of going missing. People experiencing dementia-related illnesses may wander and become lost and are vulnerable if not found quickly.

Some people may go missing and not be reported to police; for example, people who have disconnected from their families, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) or lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ) backgrounds, and homeless people.

Reasons people go missing

It is important not to jump to conclusions about why someone has gone missing.

Researchers have identified numerous factors that may contribute to people going missing, including being lost and forgetful, interpersonal conflict, wanting to become independent, being the victim of a crime, mental health problems, financial problems, drug/alcohol abuse, other abuse or neglect, medical injury, suicide, homicide, or natural disasters/war.

The needs of families

Families report that the following supports are useful when a loved one is missing:

- Practical assistance with legal matters, investigative enquiries and details about issues relating to the missing person.
- Being linked in with support quickly so that people know they are not alone.
- The opportunity to talk and acknowledge the loss of the missing person.
- An understanding about the appropriate counselling approaches, relevant to the experience of missing.
- Support that is encouraging yet respectful of the differing reactions that families experience.
- An understanding from primary health care providers of the need to share the physical and emotional impact that missing has on them.
- Understanding that ambiguous or unresolved loss is a type of trauma and loss that is challenging to live with.
- Increased media and community awareness of missing people and the impact on those left behind.

How you might feel

When families first discover that their loved one is missing, 'there is a sense the world shifts significantly.' Individuals often say they literally cannot stop thinking about their loved one's disappearance, where they may be and what may have happened.

Missing is an 'unexpected' event and an unfamiliar experience.

I was not aware of the issues families go through or any of the statistics about missing persons' issues until this happened to us.

Individual family members' initial reactions may differ and they may experience a variety of emotions.

I burst into tears at a drop of a hat.

I spent a lot of time thinking about 'what if?'

I felt absolutely helpless all the time.

I am not normally one to panic, but I was panicking on that first night, I felt very alone.

There is no right or wrong way to feel. Many families describe an ongoing 'emotional roller coaster' when someone is missing. Rapid and unexpected emotional changes are not uncommon.

In the earlier days it is a roller coaster experience. You really do go up and down. You have good and bad days.

What helps: Looking after yourself when someone is first missing

When a loved one is first missing, families face the challenge of navigating an unfamiliar system. This period of time can be overwhelming, stressful and confusing. Therefore, it is important that families look after themselves during this time. Tips on taking care of yourself can be found in the *Taking care of yourself when someone goes missing* fact sheet (see Appendix A, page 61).

Families have told us the various strategies that helped them:

- Talking with someone you trust
I like to talk about things and need to be able to do that.
- Taking small steps
Just take one day at a time.
- Maintaining hope
Don't give up.
- Being proactive
Be strong and demand things.
- Seeking help
Seek help, it's so important; don't hide away from the experience.
- Accepting support
Don't do it by yourself, don't underestimate the power of support.
- Understanding how others cope
Accept everyone is dealing with it differently in your immediate family. Give people in your family latitude and space. Be understanding and tolerant of how the other people you love are dealing with the situation, and acknowledge that there is no one way that is right. Everyone deals with it differently.
- Using distraction
I keep busy with work as a distraction.
- Return to a routine
Even though it is difficult in those early days you still have to try and normalise your life as much as you possibly can. I don't know whether it was right or wrong to continue to [work], but that is what I did... it was important to keep doing the normal stuff.
- Looking after yourself
Make sure you care for yourself, because you're not going to be able to help others in your life if you don't. So it is really important to make sure you're keeping a balance in your life.

How to tell other family members

Notifying family members and friends that a loved one is missing can be a daunting task. In accordance with the relevant legislation, it is important that the 'senior next of kin' (if available) is told about the missing person's disappearance. A senior next of kin can be:

- (a) a spouse, or
- (b) if not (a), then a son or daughter (18 years of age or over), or
- (c) if (a) and (b) are not available, parents of the missing person, or
- (d) if none of (a), (b) or (c) are available, the missing person's brother or sister.

The police will want to talk directly with the senior next of kin to obtain information and history of the missing person and to relay up to date information about the investigation to them.

Individuals are often unsure about who to tell. They are also unsure as to how much and what information to provide. Some family members may want as many people as possible to know, while others may want to protect the missing person's privacy in the hope they will return home before others need to be told.

Prior to telling relatives and friends it may be helpful to hold a smaller family meeting to:

- decide who should be contacted
- decide what information you wish to share and what information remains private
- nominate a spokesperson to speak on behalf of the family
- list what you may like others to do to help with the search
- list the type of support others can provide; for example, prepare a meal or pick up younger children from school.

Talking to children and young people

Families with children and young people often ask what they should say when a parent, sibling, grandparent or other relative is missing. Children may express their feelings in ways different to adults. Their distress and grief can appear to be less overt than an adult's and may be expressed in their

behaviour. Their behaviour may become more challenging, demanding and difficult and some children may look for reassurance, closeness, comfort and support.

The age, developmental stage and emotional maturity of the children in the family are important factors to consider when talking about the missing person and the investigation.

Other factors to consider when informing children are:

- The closeness of the relationship with the missing person and the amount of contact prior to missing.
- The reaction to the absence of the missing person (consider level of distress, type of questions asked, behavioural changes).

When talking to children:

- Provide information that is appropriate to their age.
- Provide information that is honest, clear and simple.
- Inform the child about what you and others are doing to find the missing person.
- Provide reassurance and information about who is available for support.
- Keep to daily routines as much as possible.
- Encourage questions and expression of emotions.
- Keep young people informed of information as you become aware of it.

If you don't tell me and I hear people whispering, I think something bad has happened.

What to expect

It is important that if you have serious concerns for a person's health and wellbeing and you don't know where they are, that you contact your local police station to make a missing person's report. You do not have to wait 24 hours to file a missing person's report.

You can make a missing person's report at your local police station, regardless of where the person went missing. The sooner you notify the police that your loved one is missing, the sooner they will be able to begin searching.

Visiting a local police station to report someone as missing can be a frightening and unsettling experience; however it is your legal right to do so. When you attend a police station to report someone missing, it will help the police if you can provide the following information (if possible):

- A recent photo of the person.
- A detailed description of the person including height, weight, age, hair colour, eye colour, build, and any other distinguishing features.
- The person's full name, including any aliases or nicknames they may use.
- Date and place of birth.
- Any factors that give you concern for their current wellbeing.
- Address, phone numbers, email accounts, social network accounts (for example, Facebook).
- Names and contact details of friends, associates, employer, work colleagues and school (if young person).
- Contact details of the missing person's doctor, dentist or any other health practitioner.
- Any medical requirements or medications needed.
- Any likely destinations, for example favourite places, work/study locations or places with past connections.

- Bank, credit card or other financial accounts.
- Centrelink benefits or other benefits they may have been receiving.
- Car registration number, make, model or any other transport the person may be using, such as a motorbike or bicycle.
- License and passport details.
- Description of the time and place they were last seen, clothes last seen wearing, people they were last sighted with, where they were heading.
- Description of previous missing episodes, the circumstances and where they were found.
- Any behavioural changes, personal, medical or emotional problems they may have experienced before they went missing.

Keep a record of the report. It may be helpful to record the following information:

- Event number for the investigation
- Police station
- Rank and name of police Officer in Charge (OIC); this will be the person you contact when you wish to follow up
- OIC telephone
- OIC fax and/or email
- Alternate contact person if OIC is unavailable

The search

Discuss with the OIC:

- The best way to access ongoing feedback about the investigation. Advise the OIC of the best contact person within your family/friends for them to contact with updates.
- Any plans to involve the media or publicise the case, including any plans to create posters, or use social media. Police will seek consent for publicity from you prior to involving media.
- Any information you think of, or find, that may be helpful in locating the missing person, no matter how small.

- Any plans to make your own enquiries (for example, contacting friends, family, agencies, and searching their residence or possessions). Update the OIC of any outcomes from these enquiries.
- Notify the OIC immediately if the missing person returns home or makes contact with you or any other member of your family. They will need to be sighted safe and well by police, or someone in a position of authority, to be removed from the missing persons' list.

Check with hospitals in the area. If the missing person was in an accident, he or she might be in a local hospital and unable to make contact. Call all facilities in your area to rule these possibilities out.

- When you make the calls, ask for the missing person by name.
- If no one by that name is on record there, ask if they have unidentified people in their care who resemble your missing person.

Check social media sites. Check his or her Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other accounts and determine whether recent activity contains any clues. Look at the missing person's friends' sites as well.

- Print out correspondence and activities that seem as though they could help locate the missing person.
- Report any activity that might be a clue to the OIC.

Put up posters with a picture and description of the missing person. In some cases posters can alert friends and neighbours who might have information about the missing person's whereabouts. Put up the posters in the neighbourhood where the missing person lived and around places where he or she spent time.

- Hang your posters in prominent locations, like petrol stations, grocery stores, post offices, banks, a local library, churches, hospitals, homeless shelters, parks and hiking trails.
- Be sure to include a recent, clear photograph of the missing person.
- Include the person's age, a physical description, and the date he or she went missing.
- Include contact information for the OIC or a mobile number that is not your personal one.

Alternative search options

Families often experience a sense of helplessness when someone goes missing. Sometimes families will ask what they can do to help with the search. If, after discussion with police, you decide to conduct your own search, it might be helpful to ask family and friends to assist. It helps to have support from others at this time.

Contact the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC). The NMPCC is operated by the Australian Federal Police, and will assist to upload information about a missing person so that law enforcement officials, agencies, and individuals can search the site. NMPCC does not investigate or search for missing people. It aims to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons and to educate the Australian community about this significant issue.

↳ Phone 1800 000 634

↳ Website..... www.missingpersons.gov.au

Ask people to spread the word. Send out an email with a picture of the missing person and a request to pass the word around. Post a picture and description of the missing person on your social media pages and ask people to share.

Alert the local media. Getting the media involved is another important way to publicise the fact that you're looking for a missing person.

- Send photos and videos of the missing person to your local TV stations.
- Call your local newspapers and ask them to publish an article on the missing person.
- Take out an ad in a weekly newspaper.
- Send information to local blogs and websites.

Consider hiring a private investigator. A private investigator charges for their service. Make sure you research private investigators in your area and work with one who is registered before you sign a contract or agreement. Be clear about their charges.

Other things that might be helpful include keeping a journal of the investigation. It can be overwhelming to remember every conversation. Keep note of names, dates, times and any significant points.

Most importantly be mindful of your safety when making your own enquiries.

Non-police tracing agencies

Sometimes someone may be missing from your life and this can occur for a variety of reasons. Unless there are concerns for the missing person's safety and wellbeing the police may not be able to accept a missing person's report. Listed below are some of the non-police tracing agencies that may be able to assist you. If there is an active police investigation, it is important to inform the officer in charge that you are using these services.

Salvation Army Family Tracing Service

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service (SAFTS) aims to bring family members who have lost contact back together. They work across more than 100 countries of the world and search for the family member, with whom contact has been lost. They are a strictly confidential service and do not divulge any information on their searches unless given permission to do so. They deal primarily with family disconnection but can provide advice on how to proceed with the reconnecting process. SAFTS is a donation only service and will suggest an amount based on individual circumstances. For further information please contact:

↳ Phone (02) 9211 0277

↳ Email familytracingservicensw@aue.salvationarmy.org

↳ Website..... www.salvos.org.au/familytracing

International Social Service

International Social Service (ISS) Australia is a small non-government social work organisation with over 50 years' experience defending children's rights and connecting families across the world. The national office is in Melbourne and there is a NSW office in Sydney.

ISS Australia is a member of the ISS international network, which operates in more than 130 countries worldwide. ISS Australia's network membership has the unique capacity to refer cases to qualified colleagues virtually anywhere in

the world and to work effectively in supporting Australian families separated by international borders.

Some of the services provided include:

- Family and post adoption tracing for those who wish to locate an immediate family member overseas.
- International parental children abduction, which is when a parent takes a child to another country without the other parent's consent, or refuses to return a child from overseas after an agreed period.

If you require an ISS service, please call:

- ↳ Phone 1300 657 843
- ↳ Email iss@iss.org.au
- ↳ Website..... www.iss.org.au

Red Cross International Tracing Service

The Tracing Service in Australia is part of the International Red Cross Red Crescent global tracing network.

Their mandate is to restore family links between relatives who have been separated from their loved ones as a direct result of war or disaster.

This tracing service is free. For further information please contact:

- ↳ Phone (02) 9229 4111
- ↳ Website..... www.redcross.org.au

Social media and other websites

FFMPU Facebook page

The FFMPU Facebook page allows for regular updates to be posted, and families and friends have an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about the work of FFMPU. The page has broadened the scope of the work FFMPU does as it has enabled contact to be made with people at both a national and international level in a way that has is unprecedented.

- ↳ Facebook www.facebook.com/missing.persons.501
- ↳ Website..... www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au

Missing Persons Advocacy Network

The Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN) aims to create awareness for Australian missing persons and offers practical support to those left behind. MPAN has developed an online guide of what to do when someone goes missing, and tries to establish corporate partnerships that not only increase visibility for the issue but also lessen the financial impact on those searching.

- ↳ Facebook www.facebook.com/MPANaus
- ↳ Website..... mpan.com.au

Australian Missing Persons Register

The Australian Missing Persons Register website is free and was created to raise awareness of missing persons to the public. The aim of the register is to provide information about missing persons from every state and territory in Australia.

- ↳ Facebook www.facebook.com/austmissingpersons
- ↳ Website..... www.australinamissingpersonsregister.com

Ambiguous loss

The type of loss experienced when someone disappears is very different to other types of loss that an individual may experience in their life (for example, the death of a loved one). This is because there is often a feeling of finality when a death occurs, as it is often known what has happened to the person. The term often used in the literature to describe this unique type of loss, when someone is missing, is 'ambiguous loss'.

Dr Pauline Boss developed this term in the 1970s when she began working with families of soldiers missing in action. Pauline Boss has conducted ongoing research with families impacted by ambiguous loss.

Pauline Boss has summarised ambiguous loss as: *Where a loved one disappears in body or mind*. She further defines ambiguous loss as: *The most stressful type of loss; a type of loss that lacks answers, is unclear, indeterminate and often goes unacknowledged*.

Pauline Boss describes two types of ambiguous loss:

- 1. When a person is physically absent but psychologically present.**
This is when a person is physically missing from the family but kept 'psychologically present'. The disappearance may be sudden and unexpected; the person has become physically absent but kept present in the minds of the family. Examples include missing persons, kidnap, divorce, adoption and migration.
- 2. When a person is psychologically absent but physically present.**
This is when a person is physically present but psychologically, emotionally or mentally unavailable to those around them. They are available physically but not present in mind, as the family once knew them. Examples include dementia-related illness, mental illness, drug addiction, brain injury, stroke or coma.

It is this first type of loss, being 'physically absent but psychologically present' that impacts families of missing people. Pauline Boss recognises that one

of the greatest challenges faced by families of missing people is the struggle of not knowing what has happened to their loved one. Families don't know whether to wait for their missing person's return or to come to terms with the possibility that the missing person may be gone forever. Families often express the fear that they may never know, or may never have the chance to say goodbye. Without proof, families do not know if their loved one is dead or alive. Families have reported feeling 'frozen' and 'stuck'.

Some of the common impacts of ambiguous loss on families are:

- Confusion, as 'missing' inherently defies logic and the ability to problem solve. It is difficult to know how to make sense of a situation 'when it is not known if the loss is temporary or final'.
- Changes in usual relationships and conflicts may emerge amongst family members. Conflict naturally arises when there are no answers and individuals form different beliefs about what has happened to their missing loved one.
- Distress that is often not validated, recognised or talked about in society.
- Physical and emotional exhaustion over time.
- A sense of isolation or aloneness.
- The re-evaluation of an individual's perception of the world as *...a fair, safe, understandable place.*

Pauline Boss also writes about the pressure to 'find closure' in our society which is often reinforced in media articles and echoed in community comments. We live in a society that places high value on resolving problems, finding solutions, and 'getting over things' quickly. There is a general discomfort when faced with 'missing' as it often has no answers or resolution.

Pauline Boss argues that 'closure' is a myth in the context of ambiguous loss. Families should not be forced to find closure when this is a type of loss that doesn't have answers or a definitive end. She explains:

Ambiguous loss is qualitatively different from ordinary loss (death) in that the person is still here, but not all here. Part is gone, part remains. As a result, there is no possibility of resolution or closure.

Many family members echo this belief, that closure does not fit within the context of missing. For many, closure represents findings answers, 'moving on' and possibly closing a door. Living with missing presents few answers. It is impossible to know how to close the door when the possibility can't be ruled out that a loved one may return. One mother reflects:

Death is hard but not knowing is harder. You can't let go, you can't move on.

Pauline Boss emphasises the importance for families to label ambiguity, to understand the common impacts of ambiguous loss and to realise that their reactions to ambiguous loss are not abnormal, nor are they an indication of any personal weaknesses. The families we interviewed echo this belief that it is important to be able to name the type of loss they are experiencing, to provide some kind of framework of understanding.

Listening to you describe ambiguous loss enables me to identify exactly what I am going through. [It is] good to let others and especially family and friends know what it is and to talk about it. I think it is important to see what we are going through is real and has a name. It is good to have a definition in an environment that does not always seem real and does not always make sense.

The trauma of missing, particularly when this continues over a period of time, may disrupt daily routines and have a significant impact on relationships, health, finances, and overall wellbeing. It may also lead to family conflict as each individual attempts to find his or her own meaning for what has happened. Families have shared some of their personal journeys through missing and how the following issues impact in different ways. While reading these reflections it is important to keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way to feel, as each individual's experience may vary. Families of missing people may find that they can relate to some experiences and not to others.

Living with 'not knowing'

Most families identify the 'not knowing' as the hardest aspect of missing and that an ongoing source of trauma is the uncertainty about what has happened to their loved one. The greatest challenge is understanding how to live with 'not knowing' and uncertainty when society is geared towards solving problems, having control, and finding answers. Missing is inherently incomprehensible, it is confounding and confusing to all. It is hard to wrap your head around *...how can someone just disappear off the face of the earth?* One parent reflects on their own struggle with 'not knowing':

The mind asks questions continually but there are never any real answers, just suppositions which swirl around in your head leaving you dizzy and no further advanced.

The ongoing focus

When missing continues, it is not unusual for thoughts about the missing person and a pre-occupation with what may have happened to them to continue to be a central focus. It is difficult to stop thinking about what has happened.

No matter where you are; it is constant; it never leaves you.

phone or searching for their missing loved in the faces of passers-by, even many years after their disappearance.

Every time the phone rings I jump, it could be her.

I still look for him in crowds, on trains, in passing cars. The mind plays terrible tricks.

I still do it when I see a man walking. I still break my neck, slow down or pull over just to check if it is him. It does not leave you.

This state of remaining in high alert is often called 'hypervigilance', and can be emotionally and physically exhausting.

Hope

Many family members shared their experience of hope. For some, the meaning of hope and hopefulness changes; however families believe hope is a fundamental aspect of living with missing.

Hope is really important for me. Because if you don't have hope, you're not alive. Hope has to be there because your mind won't let you not hope. I tried it once, I just decided he is not here and he is not coming back and I won't see him again. But your mind won't let you; there is a part of you that has to hang on, however small it might be. Sometimes it is not very big, it varies and depends on how you're feeling.

For some hope was a constant in their lives.

No, it [hope] doesn't change. I have the same hope I had the first day, hope doesn't change – it is that [my son] will walk back in.

For others, the nature of hope shifts and changes.

Hope has shifted from hoping that we find him alive, to just hoping that we find him.

I still have a glimmer of hope that he will be found alive, but I still have hope that either way he will be found and I try to think positively and that would make it so much easier for us. We have bought a plot and we just want to put him to rest. But I still have hope he is alive as he is a fighter; after all he went through and he would not give up easily.

Up until six months ago I still had the hope that we'd find her. Now I hope that she's at peace. Sometimes I think we're not going to find her and worry that no one's looking after her.

I have hope of finding a body, but I do think about what might be found. I talk to her, as I walk along the waterfront; still looking, even though I think we're not going to find anything.

The nature of grief

Grief is a term used to describe the emotional reaction to a loss. Some family members and friends who have a person missing have reported feeling grief, while others have referred to their experience differently. This section may or may not be helpful in addressing issues related to missing depending on your situation.

Family members have shared how missing can interrupt the process of grieving because they cannot know what has happened to their loved ones:

You can't grieve properly because you don't know whether he is alive or dead – that is the hard part about missing.

Some family members reflect on how their journey of missing has changed over time.

It seems to me that we have entered a new phase to our grief. I never thought about this before that I would reach this stage of acceptance. Although there is that element of hope that he [my son] is around and he might turn up.

Changes in individual's core values and beliefs (alterations in systems of meaning)

The loss experienced when a person goes missing may challenge an individual's view of the world as a safe, understandable, predictable place. Missing challenges our understanding of the world and does not fit with our usual life expectations.

In life there's beginnings and ends and with missing there isn't.

For some having a loved one disappear may challenge their faith.

In terms of my own spirituality, I don't have the faith in God that I used to. When something like this happens in your life, I recall other things happening in the world and ask how can God allow this to happen?

And for others, faith may be strengthened or may play a crucial role in helping them live through the experience.

Praying is very important to me because that is what I have left... Prayer helps me a lot.

The social impact

When a loved one goes missing the impact may often be felt socially. Living with missing can change relationships, communication with others, and understanding of family and social roles.

People cross the road to avoid talking to me. It's not exactly dinner-party conversation.

The impact on families

Missing affects family members of all ages, and in different ways. Family members shared the different feelings and responses that they noticed within their families.

Mum and I are the only ones that have a conversation or get upset. Even having photos up will make my brother angry. Half of the family doesn't acknowledge it.

I don't want to feel that grief, I have put that deep in me and that is where it is to stay. But my partner will go and open it up, and so that is an enormous difference between us.

There are often differences in perceptions of how to respond, or differences in beliefs about what has happened to the missing person, which can lead to disagreement or conflict. One family member reflects on the importance of making space for these differences in families:

Making space is so important. You have to allow your partner or other people in your family to grieve or deal with this loss in the way they want to deal with it. I keep saying there is no right and wrong way.

Changes in relationships

For some, missing may bring unexpected lessons, strengthen family relationships and clarify what an individual may value in life.

It brings you closer – no one else can understand in the same way.

Others reflect on how relationships changed after a loved one disappeared:

Friendships change dramatically... My relationship with my husband and children has changed too... I wish that my partner especially would be

more aware of why this happens – but I usually have to 'paint a picture' for him to understand what I am feeling and going through.

It changes the dynamics of existing friendships and relationships. The people I thought were my closest friends were not able to understand and be there for me emotionally.

Friendships change dramatically – some of my friends may feel that I have become more distant.

Having a loved one disappear may bring individuals closer to some and feel more distant from others.

When people ask me how I'm going and show some real understanding... that's why I've befriended certain people since [my son] went missing... people who have empathy for our situation, whereas friends who ask a million questions are harder to deal with and I don't always want to talk about it; it brings discomfort.

Family members also reflect on strengths in relationships, which helped protect them from relationship breakdown.

We are fortunate that we have the basis of a very strong relationship. And the foundation stones are there. Therefore, we have not allowed this grief or loss in our life to impact on that in such a way that it has destroyed it. But it is easy to see where if there was a degree of tension or incompatibility in a relationship, the loss could be a tipping point.

Many reflected on the importance of friendships and social networks to help them at such a difficult time.

It is good to have people who are 'there' for you. I feel lucky to have that because otherwise I don't think I would have been able to cope at all.

However for some individuals, the grief they experience can be very powerful.

You can't understand why they are not giving you the attention which perhaps you're used to... or the time. And you're obviously doing the same because your grief wraps you up in your own little box.

Kenneth Doka (2011) has written extensively about individual grieving styles. He names 'intuitive' grief and 'instrumental' grief as two points on a grief continuum. Family members and friends of those living with missing may find his explanation useful in understanding their responses and feelings.

Intuitive grief is grief that is felt and expressed emotionally. It may involve intense and overwhelming emotion. Instrumental grief is a style of grief that may involve the individual in practical or physical activities and efforts in an attempt to manage their feelings. Practicality and task oriented activities are characteristic of an instrumental style of grieving.

Although these two styles of grief are stereotypically associated with gender, they are useful for understanding some of the behaviours you, a family member or friend may be aware of in response to the missing person.

Doka (2011) also states that there is a third style of grief, referred to as a dissonant style of grief that may occur. A dissonant style of grief occurs when an individual's inner emotions conflict with their outer behaviours preventing them from moving forward.

Support and counselling can be helpful for individuals in understanding their individual responses.

Community responses to missing

When a loved one goes missing, the distress felt by family members may not be validated, recognised or talked about in the community. This can lead to feelings of isolation: *I felt very alone and continue to feel alone.* Family members, friends and the community may struggle to know what to say or how to say it. Sometimes this may mean they avoid talking about the missing person or to family members.

People avoid the subject... even those who know me and know what has happened, don't say anything... missing is like the 'elephant in the room'.

They don't know what to say. There's a partial wall that goes up and I feel uncomfortable.

Mum is really hurt that a lot of her friends stopped talking to her or calling her. I think that you need that network but the community doesn't know how to react to it, they don't know what to do. They just think, I don't know what to say, I'll back off.

There are few rituals in our society to formally recognise or honour missing people, or the situation of families who wait for them. Family members report that one of the hardest things for families of missing people is the limited opportunity, acknowledgement or ceremony for their missing loved one.

Another common thread is not having a public place of dedication/memorial to be able to visit or go to – we are unable to go to a cemetery to pay our respects.

Family members can feel further isolated when met with community responses that show a lack of understanding of their experience. A particular challenge reported by family members, is feeling pressured by others to reach a conclusion about what has happened to the missing person or to accept that they are gone.

People think that because it has been three and half years, you should be over it.

I have no support, the family keeps telling me to move on... but how am I supposed to do that when I don't know what has happened?

Access to support

A number of family members report reaching out for support from health professionals only to find little is known about the impact of missing and how to respond. A number commented on the inadequacy of applying traditional models of grief and loss counselling when a loved one has disappeared.

I don't think therapists and GP's know how to deal with it... I think maybe it is compared to the grief experienced when someone passes away.

Some found that the pressure to find closure was echoed by health professionals, a response that felt harmful rather than helpful.

I did go to see a therapist and I found that she did not really grasp the concept of missing. She kept going on about 'closure' and kept saying at least you will have some 'closure' if you know either way. I felt I was going backwards. It was not very beneficial for me and I went backwards pretty badly.

Sleep difficulties and health changes

Individuals may experience a range of health difficulties in response to the trauma of having someone missing. Diet, exercise, sleep patterns and emotional functioning may be affected. Sleep disruptions may include difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or experiencing nightmares. Lack of sleep can affect a person's concentration and ability to focus.

It can also affect a person's mood and complicate the other emotional impacts experienced.

I haven't slept well since he went missing.

It never leaves your mind; I woke up at 3am this morning.

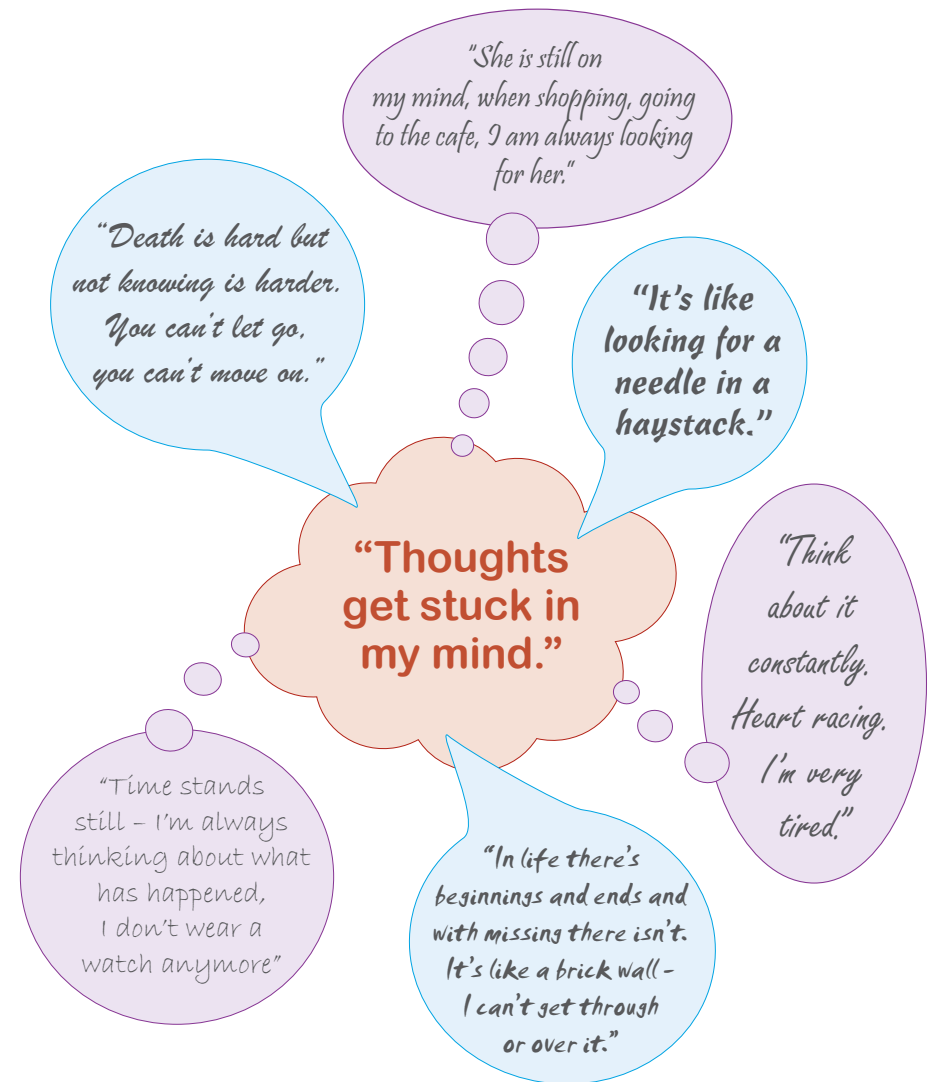
Significant anniversaries and dates often remind people of the person who is missing. For families of long term missing people, this may highlight awareness of the length of time that has passed since they last saw or spoke to their loved one. Unplanned or random thoughts can also prompt upsetting memories.

These may include:

- Anniversaries of the date the person went missing.
- Birthdays, Christmas, graduations and other cultural/religious significant dates.
- Marriages or births of other significant family members.
- Hearing a news story about another missing person.
- Seeing someone on the street who resembles the missing person in some way.
- Hearing a song that is a reminder of the missing person.
- Media coverage of missing people.

There are many triggers that bring thoughts and memories of him everyday. Seeing young people about his age or someone with a short haircut like his or just seeing a small child can bring back memories of him.

Comments from families on their experience of living with missing



Each family member and friend responds and reacts to this differently. Similarly, members of the same family deal with missing differently. The suggestions here may not suit everyone and it is important to utilise strategies that work for you. This may mean trying different things and using a number of approaches that help you live with 'not knowing'.

Taking care of yourself

Families often experience multiple stressors and ongoing trauma as they live with not knowing throughout the search for their missing loved one. This often occurs while family members attempt to return to day-to-day activities such as work or study. There is a large amount of stress involved in trying to balance the search with an individual's professional and personal commitments; for example, taking care of children. The combination of these stressors can have a significant impact on the individual family member's health, wellbeing, relationships, and their capacity to undertake different tasks. Therefore it is important that family members take care of themselves. Here are some key ways you can take care of yourself, for more information refer to the fact sheet *Taking care of yourself when someone goes missing* (see Appendix A, page 61).

Adjusting expectations you may have of yourself

Sometimes, people have expectations of how they should be managing their situation. They may even draw on and compare their current experience of missing with past experiences and how they dealt with them as a guide of what they should say, think or do. As a result, they may believe they are not doing as well as they should. Families, who are living with missing, manage their situation as best as they can with the resources, support and information available.

How do I cope? I'm not sure, but I know it is either sink or swim so I try to swim as best as I can with the skills that I have and the help of others who support me.

Adjusting expectations may include temporarily readjusting the standards you set yourself. For example, a family member who believes they should be able to do things as well as they did before their loved one disappeared. One family member reflects on the importance of returning to work and the expectations they have:

Even though it is difficult in those early days you still have to try and normalise your life as much as you possibly can. I don't know whether it was right or wrong to continue to [work] but that is what I did... So even though I didn't do the job as well as I could, for me it was important to keep doing the normal stuff.

Taking time out

Searching for a missing loved one rarely stops and often places an emotional, psychological, and physical toll on families and friends. The search may consume daily activities and thoughts. During these times, families may find that taking time away from the search may be difficult to contemplate and may cause feelings of guilt, self-blame, and a belief that they are 'not doing enough' or 'do not care' about their loved one. Giving yourself permission to take time out can be an important part of looking after yourself.

Talking about the sadness and memories of [my son], is like carrying around a big heavy backpack. It's okay to put the burden down sometimes; otherwise you run the risk of becoming physically sick.

Returning to a routine

A time may come when you want to, or have to return to work and re-establish some of the routine of your life. This may involve developing a new routine. Returning to work is an individual decision and may require adjustments, such as returning part time or for reduced hours each day. Individuals may find it helpful talking to their manager or someone they trust in the workplace.

Finding someone appropriate within the workplace to check in with may be helpful. It may also be helpful to discuss with your manager your duties and if they are appropriate for you. Many organisations have access to an Employee Assistance Program. This program offers free and confidential counselling to employees and their families. Talk to your Human Resources

Department about how to arrange this support. *Does a work colleague have someone missing?* (see Appendix B, page 63) can help families return to work while living with 'missing'.

Returning to a routine does not necessarily mean forgoing tasks related to the search of your missing loved one. One family member explains how he incorporates his search into his day:

I keep a diary entry for phone calls, important milestones, emails and letters.

For some families, returning to a routine gave them an opportunity to have a break from their worries and achieve a sense of normality.

I just wanted to get back to work and escape the thoughts about constantly wondering what happened to her. Being back at work made me feel normal again.

Processing what has happened

Often when a loved one is missing, individuals find that they undertake practical tasks associated with the search and investigation of their missing family member. At times trying to make sense of what has happened can be daunting and overwhelming. There are a variety of ways that people attempt to manage the impact of missing on their lives. Some of these include:

- Reflecting on values, beliefs and relationships.
- Creative outlets (for example, journalling or personal artwork).
- Receiving support from a counsellor or other health professional.
- Meeting other families who have loved ones missing (for example, attending a support group for families of missing people).
- Finding or developing rituals that validate and acknowledge the missing person.

Maintaining relationships

The impact of missing on families not only affects all within the family unit but also friendships, and for some relationships with colleagues, social and religious groups and the general community. Families can experience a difference in the way others relate to them or find that the support provided does not always meet their needs.

Family members

The impact of missing on the relationship between partners may exacerbate pre-existing problems and issues within the relationship.

We are fortunate that we have the basis of a very strong relationship. And the foundation stones are there. Therefore, we have not allowed this grief or loss in our life to impact on that in such a way that it has destroyed it.

Relationships between family members may also change as each family member tries to deal with their individual loss and grief. Some family members have reported having different ways of managing. Following are some ideas:

- Keep the communication lines open.

With each other we can talk whenever we like... [My wife will] drop everything and we'll talk for hours. After we've talked, I'll say: 'I've had enough, I can't take anymore talking' and for the rest of the day no more is said on the topic.

- Allow for space within the relationship.

I think we go on our own way – we give each other our own space.

- Recognise and accept that you may have different ways of expressing and dealing with your grief.

You have to allow your partner or other people in your family to grieve or deal with this loss in the way they want to deal with it. Because I keep saying there is not a right and wrong way... it is a very individualised experience. As part of that, you have to allow the other individual in your life to deal with it themselves as an individual.

- Let others know where you are at and what you need.

I have realised that you need to be honest with people – you need to tell them exactly what you are feeling and going through. There is a balance between saying you are okay and when you are not okay.

Supporting children and young people when a loved one is missing can be difficult for some families as they may feel the need to protect them from information that may be upsetting. It is important to keep in mind that young people are often aware that something has happened and may sense when something is not right.

Below are suggestions for adults based on FFMPU's work in supporting young people who have a loved one missing.

- Keep your explanation simple and truthful.
- Stick with what is known and the most current information.
- Reassure them that you are not going anywhere as they may worry that someone else they care about may go missing too.
- Give permission for them to express how they feel and make sure there's time when talking is possible.
- It is all right for them to see you upset as it lets them know that it is okay to express this.

For more information on children and young people's experiences and what they find helpful, see *In the Loop: Young people talking about 'missing'* (FFMPU, 2013).

Friends, acquaintances and the community

Families often talk about feeling uncomfortable in social situations because friends often do not know what to say, how to support them or may not understand their experience of loss. Many families have reported that some friendships changed as a result of their family member going missing.

Following are some ideas for friends of those living with missing.

Ideas for friends

The young people from the *In the Loop* support group and two family members shared some ideas:

- Everyone manages their loss and grief in their own way; be understanding, aware and supportive of different ways of expressing grief.
It is good to have people who are 'there' for you. I feel lucky to have that because otherwise I don't think I would have been able to cope at all.
- Provide space and an opportunity to talk. Also respect that sometimes people living with missing don't want to talk about it.
People don't ask [about my wife]; missing is like the 'elephant in the room'.

- Maintain open lines of communication and ensure that the friends who are supporting you are aware of these.

I wouldn't need anything, except for them to come around and have a coffee. (They) don't have to talk about it, just (to) know that they are there.

Talking about the missing person

Sometimes people express fears that they will forget the missing person. This concern often resonates with families when someone has been missing for a long period of time. Talking with others about what you miss most or reflecting on time shared with the missing person may help. Sharing stories and memories may provide comfort.

Families report changing priorities and the realisation of what is and is not important.

The one thing [my son] has taught me is to enjoy each day and make the most out of each day. To love those close to you and make that known and do what you can for them. I'm pretty tunnel vision(ed) about family. They have become very important to me. He has certainly taught me that... as life is so short.

Maintaining the connection with your missing person

When a person is missing, the relationship between those left behind and the missing person and their family can feel increasingly distant, leading to feelings of disconnection. There is a variety of ways that families and friends of missing people speak about living with these feelings. They cope with feelings of disconnection in different ways.

- Planning events to acknowledge the missing person.
- Finding creative outlets, such as painting, drawing, writing, making memory boxes or videos.
- Engaging in physical activities, such as planting a tree, running or singing.

Each person's way of remaining connected is unique to them. Pauline Boss says:

People must find their own way out of the ambiguity.

Support from health professionals and services

There are a number of avenues for support, which include individual and family counselling; support groups for families; and events and gatherings that bring together families of missing people and acknowledge and raise awareness of missing persons' issues.

Many individuals seek counselling at different stages of their journey as the need arises. Seeking support from a professional in a confidential, non-judgemental setting can be helpful for those impacted by the loss of a missing person. Building a comfortable relationship with a counsellor can provide the opportunity to say things you would not normally say to family and friends.

Counselling may also assist in understanding the possible impact of traumatic and unresolved loss. This may assist you to balance the ongoing search for your loved one with the other demands of your life.

Counselling was helpful. I talked about the sadness and the memories of my son. That was a comforting space.

It is also worth noting that not everyone seeks counselling and may find their own way of managing. It is an individual choice.

Counsellors at FFMPU support and work with people who are experiencing trauma and ambiguous loss. They provide telephone, email and face-to-face counselling and are also available to consult with others in the community. You can contact FFMPU or talk with your GP if you wish to be referred to a social worker or psychologist.

Some counsellors may not have worked with individuals who have a loved one missing and may be unaware of the specialised nature of working with families experiencing ambiguous loss.

Things to consider when seeking counselling:

- Consider what you want from counselling.
- Talk to your counsellor about what you want to address and what you think your needs may be.
- Consider whether you and the counsellor are a 'right fit' and if you feel comfortable talking about what is happening for you.
- Talk about what can help during times that are particularly difficult and where to seek assistance after hours.

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Groups

FFMPU counsellors facilitate these groups. The groups are held regularly at various locations in NSW. Families are able to attend as they choose. The groups bring together families with similar experiences and offer a place where they can share and hear stories, receive support and learn ways of living with not knowing.

[The group is] always very helpful. Sometimes things have not always applied [to me] but you still learn things afterwards. It is good to meet other people in the same situation. They understand you. I have a connection with another family, they also have a missing son. I look forward to seeing them at annual events, it is good to meet people, and it is unspoken support.

The groups offer families a safe and supportive environment, where they can connect with others who genuinely understand much of what they are going through. A family member found that it has been a:

...helpful experience talking to other families [and experience a] mutual understanding that you don't get anywhere else.

For some family members this can help reduce feelings of isolation and bring relief in the knowledge that they are not alone.

Attending the group can also be difficult at times as it can highlight the uncertainty of their circumstances.

I find the group work very confronting... [as I ask myself] will I still be sitting here in 20 years time? The positive thing about it is that you get the opportunity to listen to other people's experiences and to realise that you are not alone.

In the Loop

In the Loop is a group for children and young people who have a missing family member. In the Loop gives young people an opportunity to meet others in a similar situation. For some, this has given them the first chance to talk openly about their experience and share ideas for living with missing.

It was good talking with other people and writing down ideas [about living with missing].

The group created a resource called 'In the Loop: Young people talking about Missing' that uses the words and artwork from the young people to explore their experience of missing.

What can help during difficult times

Important dates, milestones, memories, and times that remind you of your family member may be difficult and heighten feelings of loss. These feelings can occur without notice. This is a normal response to the unresolved nature of missing. For some families, although not all, the feelings of loss become less intense over time.

I have a lot of memories here, good ones too, not just sad ones. The bad memories decrease as time passes. My despondency is decreasing.

Thoughts of him are always just under the surface. Sometimes I can think of him and smile but at other times the tears flow.

During difficult times, some of the following might be helpful:

- Talking to someone you feel comfortable with about what you are feeling or what is happening for you.
- Giving yourself permission to feel the emotion and recognise that this is a difficult time.
- Looking after yourself and allowing for some time out.
- Doing something that helps you relax.

Some families find rituals to acknowledge important dates such as holidays and anniversaries.

I acknowledge birthday, wedding anniversary [by] leaving some flowers at the point on a falling tide [so it is] carried out.

Raising awareness in the community

Pauline Boss states that some families make meaning of ambiguity by using *...their powers of mastery to make changes, not always to alter the tragedy of their loss, but to help others who might be suffering a similar loss in the future.*

Through the FFMPU groups and other family initiatives, resources for families, professionals and the general community have been developed to raise awareness about missing people's issues.

I personally feel, in being proactive in missing persons' issues, that I'm making a contribution with the hope that I may make it easier for other people; as you can always learn from other people's experiences.

Events for families and friends

A number of events for families and friends of missing people occur throughout the year. These events provide an opportunity for families to connect with others, meet the people who work in the missing persons' sector and acknowledge missing people in the community.

For me, going to Missing Persons Week or other FFMPU events is a way of acknowledging our son.

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Family Forum

Since 2009, FFMPU has held an annual Family Forum. The FFMPU Family Forum provides an opportunity to meet and talk to agencies and stakeholders working in the missing persons' sector. The Family Forum brings together families and provides an opportunity for families to connect and share.

National Missing Persons Week

In August each year an event is held at NSW Police Headquarters in Parramatta to mark the start of National Missing Persons Week. FFMPU actively supports this event. The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (Australian Federal Police) also hosts a national launch in an Australian capital city each year. Both events receive media coverage and are a way of raising awareness in the community.

National Missing Persons Week is good and important for the families. I guess the big thing is, if people are missing, you need people looking and if people don't know about 'missing' how can people look?

The media

In the initial stages of the search for a missing person, police or family may make the decision to involve the media to help raise community awareness and encourage people who may have additional information to come forward.

Given individual differences in each investigation, it is important to discuss media involvement with the officer in charge prior to contacting the media.

Media coverage may include television, radio, newspaper, internet and social media. It may be helpful for family members to decide prior to the interview what information they wish to disclose and what they want kept private about the missing person. Some families find it beneficial to ask the interviewer to send the questions prior to the interview to allow them time to prepare. The use of a support person throughout the interview may also be helpful.

Direct contact with the media can sometimes raise concerns for family members.

They asked me things about her mental health but I didn't think it was relevant [in] finding her.

The media may sometimes focus on sensitive information, that families may want to keep private. It is important for families to be prepared that this might happen.

I got a second mobile number to give to the media; that way they didn't contact me on my personal phone everyday.

Other ideas for working and maintaining a positive working relationship with the media are outlined in the brochure, *Someone is missing: Can the media help you?* available from FFMPU.

Media reports may trigger a range of feelings, from hope that an answer may be found, to anxiety and despair.

We want her found. My heart stops every time we hear news stories about bodies being found.

Legal and financial issues

When a loved one is missing, difficulties may arise with managing their finances, debts and property (for example, rental leases, mortgages or bills).

Section 54 of the *NSW Trustee and Guardian Act 2009* enables an application to be made to the Supreme Court, after a person has been missing at least 90 days.

The court can appoint a person (such as a family member) or NSW Trustee and Guardian as manager of the missing person's financial affairs. The court can only make a declaration that the person is missing and make a financial management order when satisfied that:

- the person is a missing person;
- the person's usual place of residence is NSW; and
- it is in the person's best interests to do so.

If you wish to discuss managing a missing person's financial and property affairs in NSW, you can consult with the NSW Trustee and Guardian or obtain further information from FFMPU or Law Access NSW.

The coronial inquest

In NSW, the police officer in charge of a missing person's investigation is required to report the matter to the State Coroner after the person has been missing for 12 months and there are no signs of life, or as soon as the investigation leads police to suspect the missing person is deceased.

A report to the Coroner does not automatically mean that a finding of death will be made. The Coroner may not assume jurisdiction at this point and may refer the matter back to the police if he/she is not satisfied the evidence establishes there is a probability that the missing person may be deceased. A report to the Coroner may result in the Coroner assuming jurisdiction and ordering a Brief of Evidence (brief). The full brief of evidence includes all police reports and witness statements compiled by police in the missing person's investigation. Accepting jurisdiction does not mean the Coroner has made a formal finding that the person is deceased but considers there is sufficient evidence to warrant further coronial investigation.

Once the brief is submitted, the Coroner will review the material and may request further investigations to be completed prior to making a decision about a coronial inquest. The senior next of kin and interested parties can request a copy of this brief to help prepare for an inquest. Coronial investigations can be complex and lengthy, sometimes taking many months or longer to progress to an inquest.

An inquest is a formal hearing in a courtroom concerning the death or suspected death of a person. At an inquest, the Coroner may call witnesses to give evidence of their knowledge of the circumstances of the suspected death. After hearing the evidence the Coroner will make findings. In a missing person's case, the Coroner firstly has to make a finding in respect of whether on the balance of probabilities she or he believes the missing person is deceased.

If the Coroner finds that the missing person is deceased then she/he is required to continue the inquest and, if there is sufficient evidence available, make findings as to five issues:

- the identity
- date
- place
- cause
- manner of death.

Sometimes the evidence presented to the Coroner does not allow a finding about one or more of these issues. This is referred to as an open finding.

Families share their thoughts about the coronial process:

- The importance of accessing support through the process
Don't do it by yourself, always have someone with you, don't underestimate the power of support.
- About accessing information in relation to the coronial process prior to an inquest
Hearing from [coronial staff]... helped me to understand how the coronial inquest works and how it could help with our case. I am less fearful of going to Coroner's Court now.

- Ideas about coping

I don't think you can tell anyone how to cope, just take one day at a time, don't give up.

- The emotional impact

The word finality, it is hard to avoid it when you go through the coronial process and you get the verdict handed down and you see it written on a piece of paper when you get the letter and so on. I know one family described the coronial findings as a sledgehammer blow. And I think the sledgehammer blow is a really appropriate term because it hits you in that way.

Some key things to understand about the coronial process in NSW include:

- Families can access information about the progress of a coronial investigation by contacting the police officer in charge of the investigation.
- Families and interested parties can seek information about coronial procedures by contacting the Coronial Information and Support Program (CISP) in their relevant state:
 - ↳ CISP NSW Phone(02) 8584 7777 (9am – 4pm Mon to Fri)
- A coronial inquest can bring up a range of emotions and concerns. Families and friends of missing persons seeking support or information about the coronial process can contact FFMPU. The FFMPU team can be available to support you at an inquest if requested.
- The coronial process is an inquisitorial non-adversarial system. It is not a criminal trial, so the Coroner does not apportion blame or determine guilt in the investigation. The Coroner makes decisions about whether to hold an inquest, makes findings about the cause of death, and can make recommendations to help prevent similar deaths.

Collection of DNA evidence

The officer in charge of the investigation may collect further information relating to the missing person. This may include dental records, medical records and x-rays.

DNA evidence will be collected if a person remains missing. This normally occurs after three months in a missing persons investigation. The officer

in charge of the investigation will organise a time for the collection of two samples of DNA from family members.

The two types of DNA collected are nuclear and mitochondrial.

1. The nuclear DNA sample may exist in a personal item belonging to the missing person, such as a hairbrush or toothbrush.
2. The mitochondrial DNA sample is obtained from a mouth swab from the closest possible female relative.

Both DNA samples are analysed and kept on a database for future comparison.

When a missing person is found, families can experience a range of emotions.

When a missing person is found alive

Family members and friends may respond in different ways.

You may be:

- relieved to hear your loved one has been located alive
- happy or excited at seeing the person again
- wanting to know why they went missing and what happened while they were away
- unsure how to explain what has happened since they left
- anxious or nervous about seeing a loved one again
- worried they may not want to have contact
- fearful they may go missing again and unsure what to say to them in case they do
- angry or hurt that you were left behind to wonder where and why your loved one was gone
- panicked about things being like they were before the person went missing
- overwhelmed, embarrassed, sad, guilty, insecure, jealous or rejected.

If people have been missing for a long time, significant events may have occurred while they were away – marriages, divorces, career changes, babies. The reuniting process can raise a variety of different emotions and expectations for family members.

If the person has been missing for some time, it is likely both of you have changed. It is important to be open and realistic about the changes in your relationship. Understanding and patience from everyone will be required.

Expectations of how and when information is shared may differ between those involved. Respecting the missing person's feelings and how much information they share will be beneficial in re-connecting.

Other considerations:

- Trust may need to be re-established.
- At times, families are eager to reconnect or find answers. This may be an overwhelming time for everyone, including the missing person, so try not to crowd, rush or pressure the missing person.
- If the missing person does not want to talk to you about some things ask if they would like help finding someone else to talk to.
- If you are concerned the person may go missing again, talk about other support options or develop a safety plan.
- Remember the reuniting process can take time.

Counselling or mediation may assist in reuniting.

When reuniting is not possible

In some instances reuniting is not possible, either for the person who has been missing, or for those who were left behind. This can cause considerable distress in families.

Sometimes the missing person cannot return home due to mental health issues, ongoing conflict, or some other difficulty. There may also be safety issues, risk of harm, or legal reasons why you or the person who was missing cannot reunite.

At other times, the missing person may not want to return home for reasons that may be difficult to understand or accept. This is their right, and it is important to be respectful of their decision. The missing person may not want to reveal their whereabouts and may limit contact for this reason.

When the missing person is not found alive

Family members and friends may experience a wide range of emotions. These may include some of the following:

- Loss of hope
- Grief

This is worse than 'not knowing'. This is not the answer we wanted.

- Relief that there are some answers.

At least I have been able to say goodbye.

- Distress at the comments made by others.

That they are 'glad' or 'happy' the missing person has been found and suggestions that this is 'good news' or 'closure' for the family.

Messages of hope

'Hope' means different things to different people and it manifests itself in different ways.

Below are some individual reflections on hope:

Our hope and Christmas wish is for families who feel our pain to have peace and avail themselves to the comfort and ongoing support of each other.

As the years pass and doubts set in, as they do from time to time, hope still remains.

There is no body, so we can't give up hope.

The human mind will not let go of the last thread of hope, even if it tries.

Hope all the time – stories of others found after 30 years gives me hope.

Don't give up hope and try to stay positive as hard as that may be.

I can't let go of hope and I wait for him to return.

Hope is really important for me. There is a part of you that has to hang on, however small it might be.

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- Wayland, S. (2007). *Supporting those who are left behind: A counselling framework to support families of missing persons*, National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police: Canberra.
- Willis, C. A. (2002). The grieving process in children: Strategies for understanding, educating, and reconciling children's perceptions of death, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29(4), 221-226.

There is no right or wrong way to feel or react when a family member or friend goes missing. Each person's experience of coping is unique. The following ideas are based on the experiences and thoughts of other families and friends of missing people.

It is important to continue to look after yourself

Physical

- Consult your GP if you have any concerns about your physical health and any symptoms you may have. Don't ignore signs that you may be unwell.
- Try to eat regularly. If you are unable to prepare meals perhaps ask a friend or family member to assist.
- Try to ensure you have some down time and enough sleep. Accept offers of help to allow you time to rest.
- Gentle exercise can help maintain mood and your ability to keep going physically.

Emotional

- Many families describe the 'emotional roller-coaster' they experience when someone is missing. Rapid and unexpected emotional changes are not uncommon.
- Acknowledging your feelings is important. This may include talking to someone you trust about what you are going through (for example, a friend, family member, counsellor, your GP) or writing your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Give yourself permission to take a break from searching. Breaks may help you to be able to cope in the long run.
- Be kind to yourself and try to do something nice, for example see friends, see a movie, get a massage.
- Feeling distracted and stressed is normal, so take care with activities that require concentration, such as driving.
- Make daily decisions where possible to give you back a feeling of being in control of your life.
- Try to re-establish routine as much as possible.

- Some families explore ways to stay connected emotionally with their missing loved one, for example through rituals such as marking their birthday or visiting a place special to them.
- Be careful of using drugs or alcohol to alleviate pain. Research has shown that many drugs and alcohol can worsen mood and problem solving abilities.

Social

- The experience of missing can feel isolating. Reach out for, and accept support, for example from friends, family, local community groups, and support agencies.
- Let family and friends assist you where possible, for example with child minding, meals, searching, contacting people.
- Let others know what you need for support. Tell them what is helpful or not helpful to say or do.
- People within the same family may react differently. It can be helpful to be understanding and give each other space and permission to cope in their own way.
- Families often ask how they can support children when a loved one goes missing. It can be helpful to:
 - ↳ Be honest about what missing means. Let them know that everyone is doing their best to look for the missing person but have not found them yet.
 - ↳ Notify the children's school. School counsellors may be a helpful resource in supporting children.
 - ↳ Set aside time for the children to ask questions and voice their thoughts. It is okay if you do not have answers to all questions.

Does a work colleague have someone missing?

Financial

- Having someone missing can cause financial strain. You may need to take time off work or the missing person may have contributed to finances.
 - ↳ For advice on entitlements to crisis payments, rent, and financial case management assistance:
 - Centrelink.....131 021
 - ↳ Contact a financial counsellor if you need advice on credit, debt, or banking issues, for example in NSW the **Credit Debt Hotline** provides financial counselling referrals:
 - Credit Debt Hotline.....1800 808 488
 - ↳ Notify your employer and GP about what is happening for you and whether you need leave from work. Explore whether your workplace has an **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** that may assist with support.
 - ↳ Contact the **FFMPU** for other referral information.

Where to get help

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit

Provides free and confidential counselling, information, and referrals to families and friends of missing persons in NSW (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday)

Freecall.....1800 227 772
 Phone.....(02) 8688 8173
 Email.....ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au
 Website.....www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au

Lifeline

A national 24-hour telephone counselling and referral service. For the cost of a local call you will be connected to your nearest centre.

Phone.....13 11 14

Lifeline Service Finder is an online directory of free or low cost health and community services available in Australia.

Service Finder..... www.lifeline.org.au/service_finder

Your local general practitioner (GP)

Consult your local GP for medical advice and referrals including referrals to counsellors through the Medicare rebate scheme.

Your local Community Health Centre (CHC)

Contact your local CHC for advice around counselling support options.



Does a work colleague have someone missing? Information for those in the workplace

Over 35,000 people are reported missing each year in Australia. That's one person every 15 minutes. In NSW alone, around 12,000 people were reported missing during 2011. Fortunately about 99 per cent of those missing persons were located, most within a short time. Sadly, approximately one per cent of missing people remain missing long-term.

Research suggests that for every missing person at least 12 people are affected but this figure may be much higher when you consider work colleagues, school or university friends and acquaintances, neighbours and others in the local or wider community who know the missing person or their family. One person going missing may affect many others.¹

Impact on those left behind

There is no right or wrong way to deal with the disappearance of a loved one. When someone goes missing family and friends will often feel confused and isolated, and initially all their time and energy may be spent on trying to locate their loved one. Family members and friends can experience a wide range of intense emotions including anxiety, worry, panic, anger, frustration, sorrow, regret, shame and embarrassment. All these feelings are normal given the circumstances, but they can be very overwhelming and can result in health problems or isolation from others.

A loved one going missing may also lead to financial difficulties. Whilst it may be very difficult to continue or return to work, the person left behind may have little choice but to do so in order to meet financial commitments. In some circumstances, it may even be necessary to increase work hours.

When someone is missing for a long period, family and friends are left to cope with ongoing ambiguous or unresolved loss. They have to deal with 'not knowing' and uncertainty whilst continuing to hope their loved one will be found safe and well. This may be very different to the feelings of grief and loss following the death of a loved one. At the same time, they need to find a way to move forward in their lives with other family members and friends.

They may:

- be easily upset and emotional
- not be their usual self
- appear distracted
- be forgetful
- have difficulty concentrating
- be absent minded
- seem tired often
- need to take time off work or reduce their hours
- throw themselves into work and work longer hours as a distraction
- appear short-tempered, less tolerant or edgy
- be less involved in what is happening at work and not as involved as they might have been before their loved one went missing.

People who have someone missing in their lives may spend a lot of time and energy searching, and also thinking and hypothesising about how and why the person went missing, where they might be, or what they could have done to prevent them going missing.

Families and friends of missing persons often report experiencing difficulty sleeping, eating and taking care of themselves physically and emotionally. Their physical and emotional health is often negatively impacted.

When a missing person is located this can also mean that your colleague will have a whole new set of issues to face, depending on the circumstances in which the person went missing in the first place and the circumstances in which they're found. The difficulties they have experienced do not necessarily end with the location of the missing person.

Things you may have noticed about your colleague

Living with a loved one missing affects each person differently. Whatever the effects it is very likely there will be some impact for the person in their work place.

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(FMP • 05/2014)

CONTACT DETAILS

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

Phone: (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • National Relay Service: 1800 555 677

Fax: (02) 8688 9632 • Email: ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au

www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au

How can I help a colleague who has someone missing?

It is often really hard to know how best to help a colleague when you know they are experiencing difficulties, especially as everyone is different. It is also hard when you are trying to be respectful of people's privacy and wanting to give them space.

How you might help:

- Be non-judgmental.
- If they have communicated their situation to colleagues in the workplace, acknowledge your awareness of it. Don't ignore their situation.
- Be an active listener, rather than a problem-solver who gives advice.
- Avoid making assumptions about what has happened or how they're feeling.
- Don't speculate about what you think may have happened to the missing person. The reasons for people going missing are many and varied and often their family and friends do not understand or know why.
- Avoid well meaning comments that imply your colleague should be 'getting over' the loss, moving on with their life or should forget their missing loved one.
- Read about missing people and the impact of having someone missing so you have a better understanding of the issues. The Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit website has further information.
- Ask your colleague how they would like to be supported. Offer some options, such as talking over lunch or morning tea. Ask if there are practical things you might be able to help with, such as preparing them a meal.
- Acknowledge that there might be times they would prefer to be left alone but flag that you will check in with them anyway.

- Encourage your colleague to access professional counselling and support services. Information, support and referrals can be provided through the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit in NSW (details listed below).
- Be supportive about their workload. Encourage breaks and self-care strategies.
- If the impact of having someone missing is impacting on your colleague's work performance, suggest they talk to their manager to negotiate appropriate tasks while they are dealing with the trauma of missing.
- If the impact for the person is also impacting on you at work, speak to your manager about how best to manage this, or make use of workplace counselling services.

¹ Henderson, M. & Henderson, P. (1998) – Issues for the Australian Community, Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, ABCI Publications.

Where can I get more information?

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit

Provides free and confidential counselling, information, and referrals to families and friends of missing persons in NSW (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday)

Phone 1800 227 772 / (02) 8688 8173
 Email ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au
 Website www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au
 Address Level 1, 160 Marsden Street,
 Parramatta NSW 2150

What if I have information about a missing person?

Missing Person reports should be made to your local police station.

If you have information that may assist in the search for a missing person contact Crime Stoppers on:

Phone 1800 333 000

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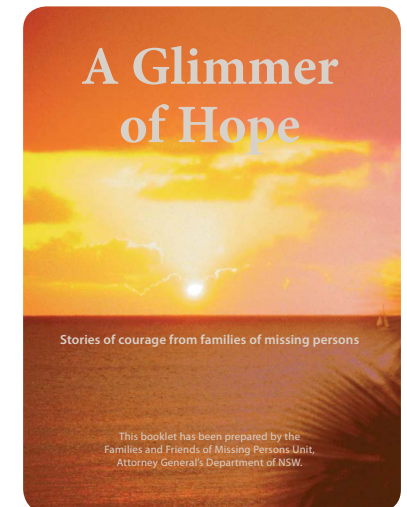
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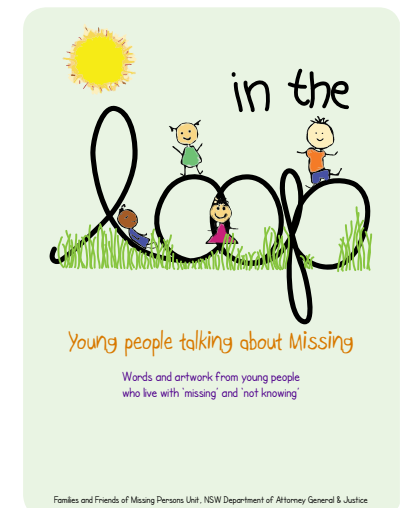
- A Glimmer of Hope: Stories of courage from families of missing persons

In their own words, families share the journeys they travelled when their loved one disappeared. The stories speak of the families' courage and the challenges they faced in living with 'not knowing'. The stories also highlight the different ways they deal with this and what they have found useful. This book has provided valuable insight into the lived experience of families who live with missing. The stories have been helpful for other families in knowing that they are not alone.



- In the Loop: Young people talking about missing

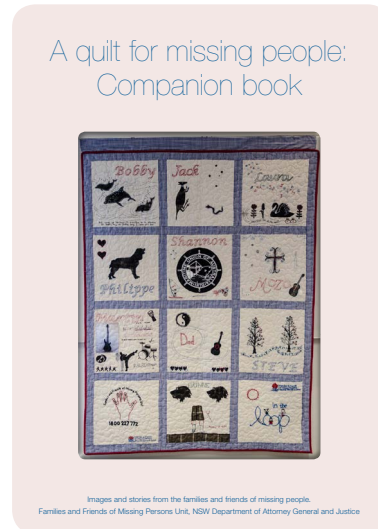
The young people's group, *In the Loop*, developed this resource that provides information about their experiences, the difficulties they face when a loved one is missing and their suggestions about what is helpful for them and the adults who care for them. It also provides information for carers about how to talk to and include young people when a loved one is missing.



- A quilt for missing people: Companion book

The quilt was a family-led initiative. Families made a square of the quilt using words and images of personal significance.

The companion book contains a story that relates to a missing person and their family, and provides an explanation of the significance of the images and words in each square.



- A guide to coronial services in NSW for families and friends of missing people

Developed by FFMPU in consultation with the Office of the State Coroner of NSW, this guide was created following discussions with family members who requested that a guide be produced to assist families of missing people to better understand coronial processes, preparing for an inquest and accessing relevant supports. It is also a useful resource for service providers, who work with families of missing people impacted by a coronial investigation.

