

Missing Persons

Some people with schizophrenia decide that a new location will provide an answer to the problems that the illness has imposed on them – or they may be directed by voices to leave. They simply disappear. When someone you are close to goes missing, it can affect your own mental health as you worry about their safety and where they are. It is important to keep a sense of hope to the greatest degree possible that the person will be found in order to keep moving forward.

If the person is a minor, you should contact the Missing Persons Bureau of the local police department.

Adults can choose to leave home and cut off all contact which means the police may be limited as to what they do in these situations. They have no authority to return the person, or to inform you of his/her actions or whereabouts without specific permission from that person. It is still reasonable to contact missing persons in your area if you are concerned for your family member's well-being.

However, it may happen that the person leaves the hospital before treatment has been completed. If the person is an involuntary patient, the hospital is responsible for notifying the police to look for and return the individual to the hospital. In some jurisdictions, if the police have been unable to find a missing involuntary patient within a certain period, the hospital then has the right to discharge the person.

When a person with schizophrenia has disappeared from the hospital, the option of changing the patient's voluntary status to involuntary is open to the attending physician(s). The police can then be asked to look for the individual.

Often, relatives and caregivers may simply have to wait until the person surfaces. When this happens, (unless the police have been involved) you may make arrangements for the person to return home or consider other options.

Here are some tips on preparing yourself for a possible disappearance of the person:

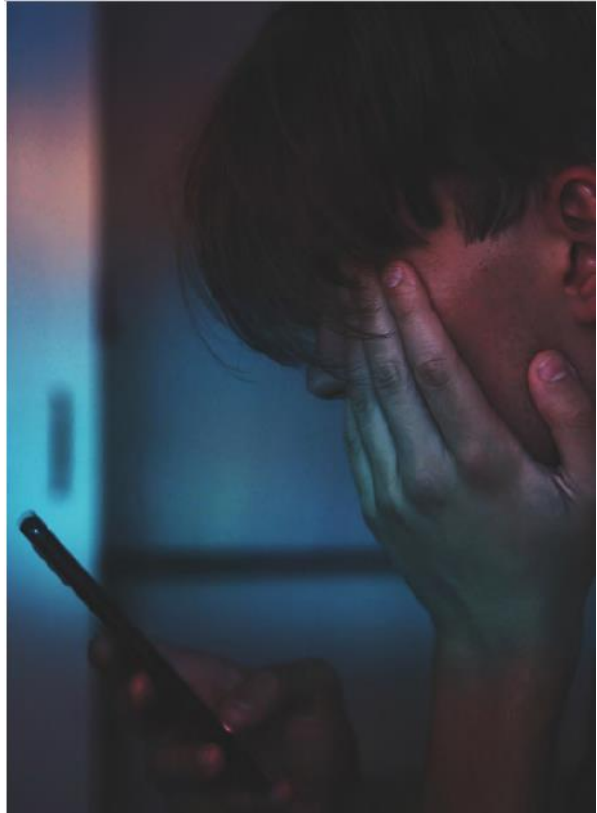
- If the person mentions places he/she is interested in, or would like to visit sometime, jot it down. It could be a useful clue as to where to look should he/she disappear.
- If he/she decides to travel, try to think of some effective way of staying in touch. For example, one father arranged with his son that he would keep his son's money for him while the son was away. Then, whenever the son needed some funds, the father would send him some, but not too much. This was an effective way of maintaining contact.

Some ideas to consider if the person disappears:

- If you have lost touch with him/her for a period of time, it is wise not to wait too long before you begin checking. Although the police may have no basis for active involvement, it is definitely worth speaking to Missing Persons and telling them your story. They may be able to help by doing some checking or offering some practical advice.
- If you have an idea where an individual may have gone, get in touch with your provincial Schizophrenia Society or the national office. They may be able to help you through a provincial association or chapter in the area where you think the person may be.

- If travel to the United States is a possibility, contact the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) directly or through SSC.
- Check with local voluntary agencies such as the Salvation Army. Sometimes a missing person will show up in one of their hostels. Also, your place of worship may be able to help, particularly if the individual took a keen interest in religion.

If you decide to use the services of a firm of private investigators, determine if the firm you select is well connected with the police (they may be able to get help from this source that you cannot.) Discuss with the firm a reasonable limit on its expenses, including the fee, to undertake a realistic search on your behalf.



The preceding information was taken from Rays of Hope: A Reference Manual for Families and Caregivers (Fifth edition): Schizophrenia Society of Canada: 2021:122-3.