

Young people talking about Missing

Words and artwork from young people
who live with 'missing' and 'not knowing'

Produced by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit in collaboration with Emily, Izi, Lily and Max.

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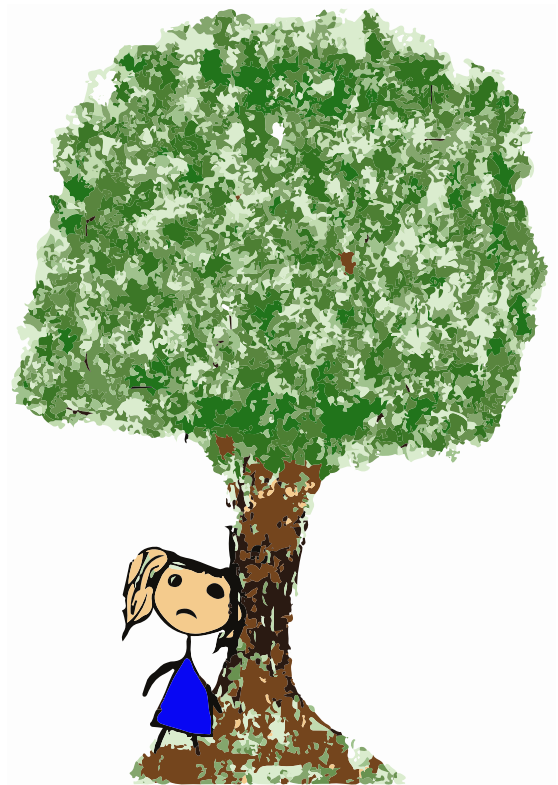
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“There are so many questions and I think the not knowing is what hurts the most.”



Foreword

I am very pleased to introduce **In the loop: Young people talking about Missing**. This resource gives a voice to children and young people affected by the loss of a loved one through missing. It reflects their thoughts and experiences. Having someone close to you missing can be overwhelming, confusing, frightening and lonely for anyone, including young people.

Young people have told us they want to be included and informed following the report to police of a missing family member. They want to be kept "in the loop".

"In the loop" is a resource for young people and those who care for them. It is hoped that it will help young people feel less overwhelmed, confused, frightened and lonely; and will provide carers with information to enable them to include and support young people through this experience.

I would like to thank all involved in the development of this resource, especially the young people and those listed on the following pages for their contribution. Their ongoing commitment to the families and friends of missing people is recognised.



Mandy Young
Commissioner of Victims Rights

Introduction

"When someone goes missing everyone thinks about the adults and they think kids are too young to understand ... young people matter too."

This book is written by and for children and young people who live with having someone missing in their lives. That missing person might be a parent or grandparent, a brother or sister, an aunt, uncle or cousin.

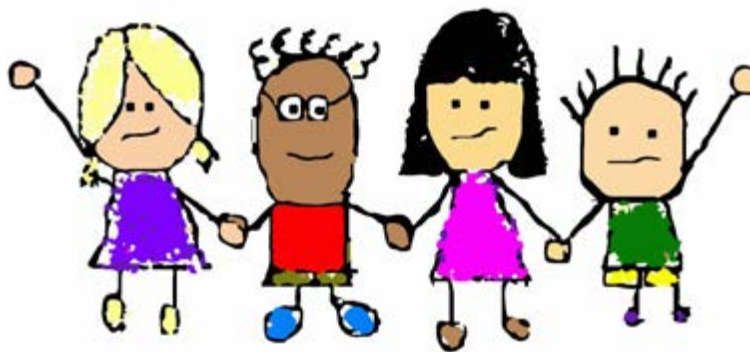
The young people from **In the Loop**^{*} tell us that they "get it". They live with not knowing and are very often able to empathise with others in similar situations. Young people tell us that they feel the 'missing' of their loved one in every aspect of their lives - at home, at school and socially. It can affect the way they relate to others in their family, their friends and at school. It not only impacts the here and now, but at times, their view of what the future holds. They express the belief that 'missing' affects how others relate to them too.

Young people, supported by the adults in their lives, met each other, shared their thoughts and stories with Liz Davies and Emmanuel Kassiotis from Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit and then allowed Hannah Park and May Hammoude to work alongside them to produce what you hold in your hands.

Most of the words, pictures and photos are theirs and are included with their permission. They have entrusted them to the team at Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit in the hope that their insights and shared experiences will be helpful for others who live with or are touched by 'missing'.

The following pages provide their insights and some (hopefully) useful information for living with 'missing'.

Liz Davies, FFMPU Coordinator



* In the Loop is an ongoing group for young people living with a missing loved one. It is open to young people between the ages of 10 and 18 years who have a loved one missing. The loved one is a relative but no distinction is made between those closest relationally and those from extended or kinship relationships. Some of the young people lived with the person who is now missing; others had less frequent contact and lived in different locations.

The adults who supported the young people to attend, and entrusted them to us for a brief period deserve recognition for this. Their ongoing support as confidantes, chauffeurs, coaches and coffee and lunch companions is appreciated.

Working with young people

We were first introduced to the 'In the Loop' group while on our university field placement at Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit. The group was made up of girls and boys, ranging from the ages 11-16, who all shared something in common - they each had a missing family member. While the length of time their loved ones had been missing varied greatly, their experiences of being 'left out' and isolated were all similar.

The 'In the Loop' sessions were a time when the young people openly talked about their missing person and expressed how they felt. The sharing of their unique stories amongst one another not only provided us with insight into their experiences but also highlighted their resiliency.

Many of the activities that the young people took part in during the group sessions assisted us in planning for, and creating this book. Through their input we are able to provide the community with a valuable resource to better inform others about what it is like to have a missing loved one and, more specifically, what it is like for young people to have to live with 'missing' and 'not knowing'.

We hope that by reading this book, others can understand that young people are affected just as much, and in similar ways to adults, and that in order to lessen their experience of isolation, including them and listening to their stories is essential.

Hannah & May*

* Hannah Park and May Hammoude are third year Social Work students from the University of New South Wales. In 2013, they completed their first field placement at the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, under the supervision of Elizabeth Davies, Coordinator of Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit.

What is 'Missing'?

A missing person is defined as:

'Anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person.'

(NSW Police Force, 2012)

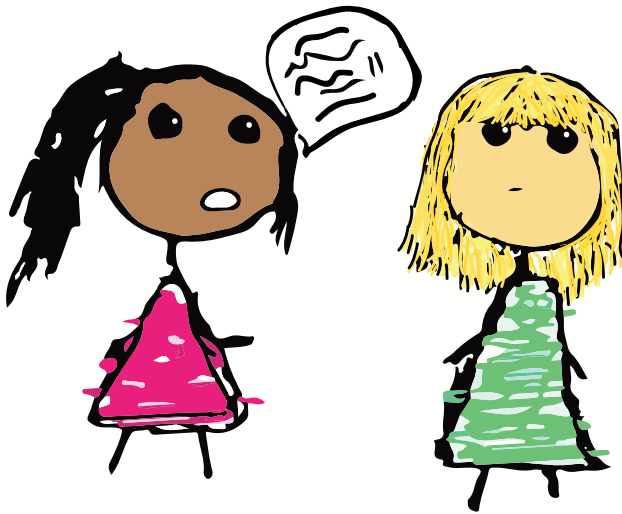


Did you know?

- A person is reported missing every 15 minutes.
- About 35,000 people go missing every year in Australia.
- For every person who goes missing, on average 12 people are affected (many of which are young people).

(Henderson & Henderson, 1997; Australian Federal Police, 2013)

How it feels



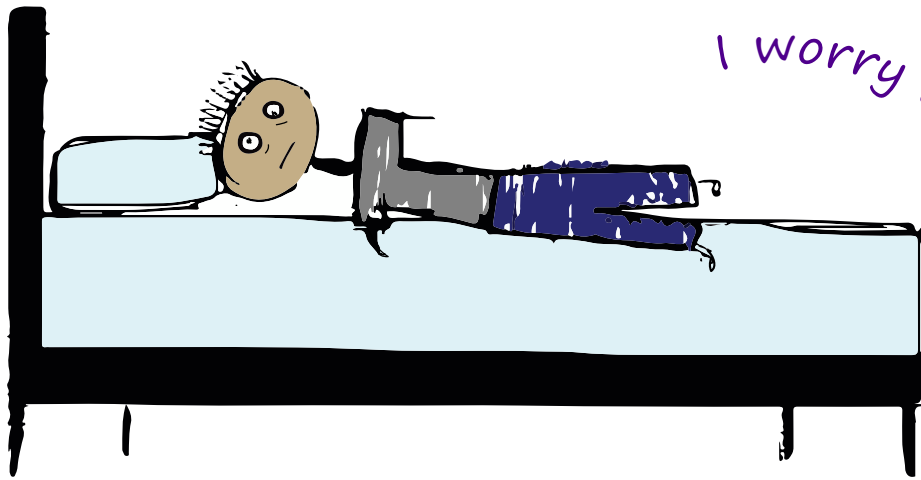
Disappointed when you tell someone and they don't say anything.

It's hard to talk about it.



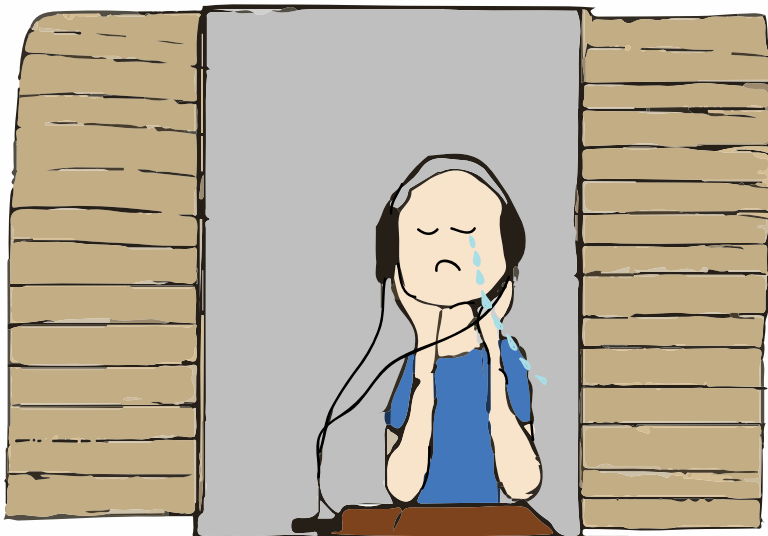
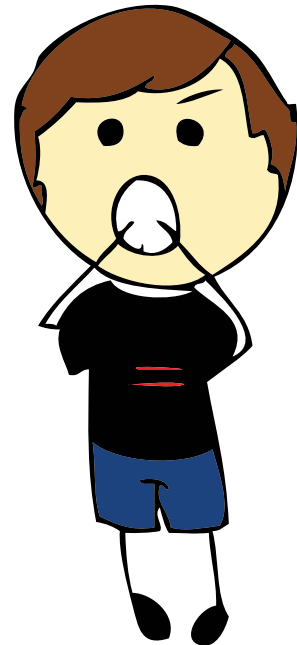
I don't like being sad, but I am.

How it feels



I worry about her.

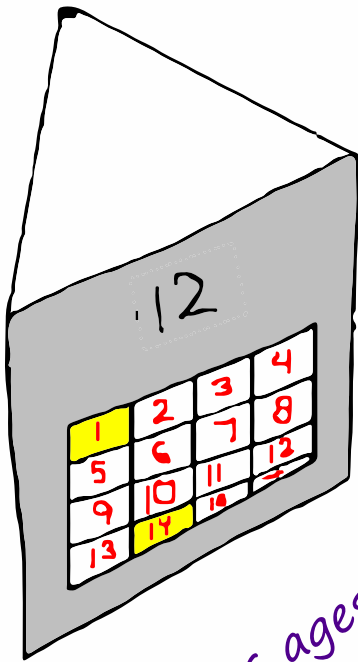
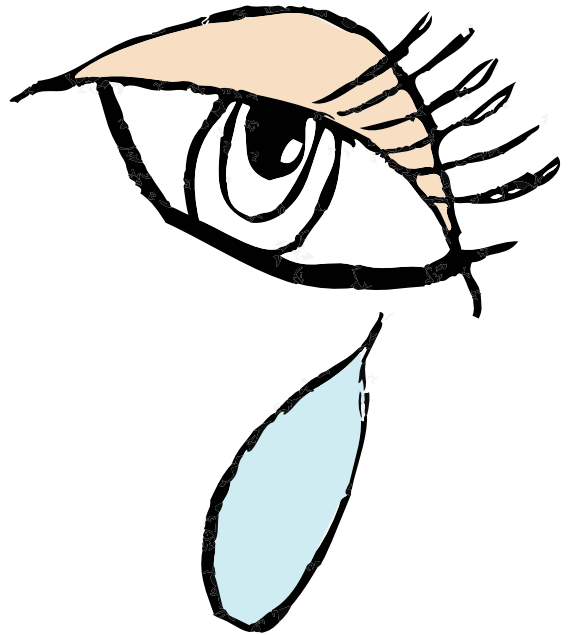
When I found out, I was shocked and angry and I didn't know what to do.



Listening to sad songs to reflect my feelings.

Please don't say things like...

"Get over it." "Move on."



"But it was ages ago."

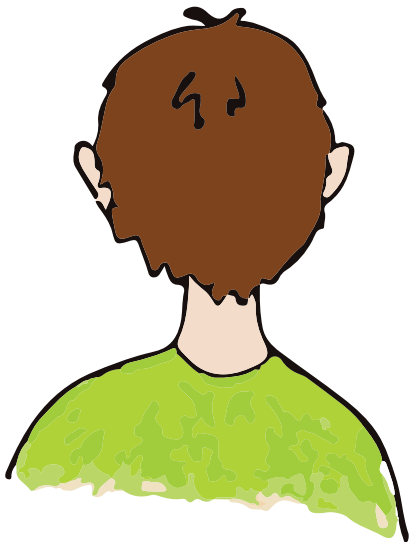


"She's only missing.
Worse things have
happened in my life."

ONLY

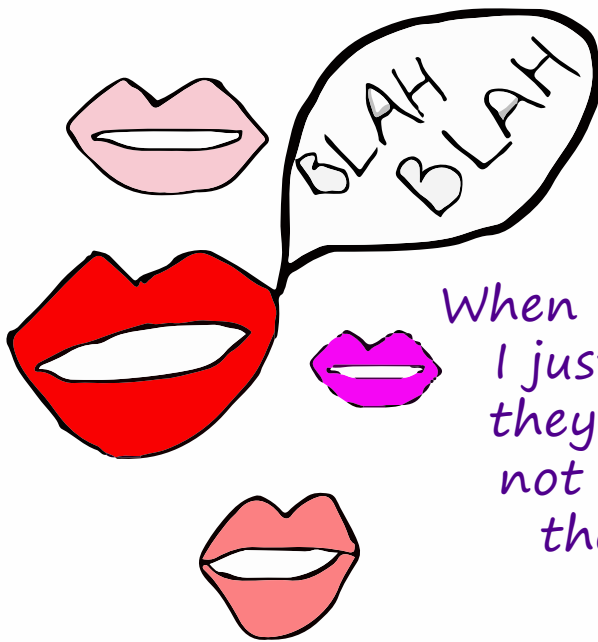
Please don't say things like...

"You weren't even close."



"People always try to reassure me that he just ran away and probably has a massive, loving family of his own - that doesn't make me feel any better."

What I want from others



When I tell someone about my uncle, I just want them to tell me that they will always be there for me, not make up stories about what they think happened to him.

The best thing to say is 'I'm here.'

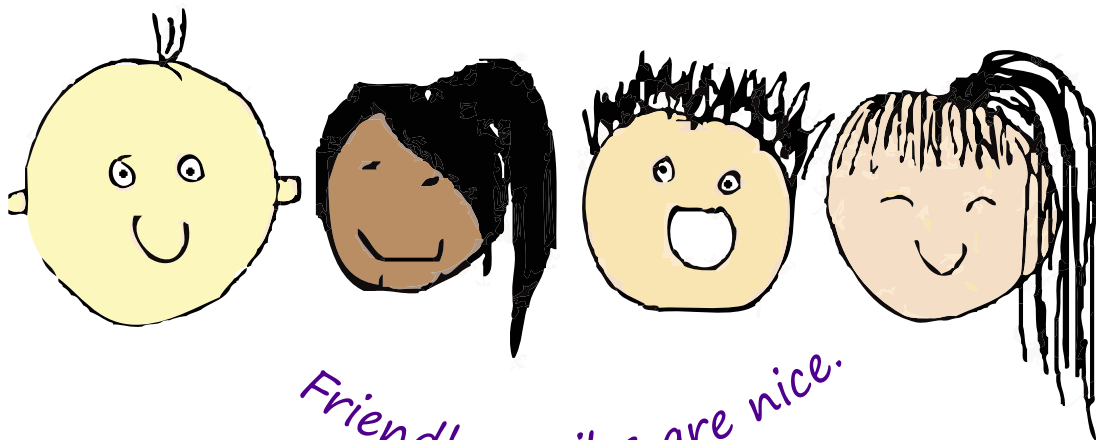
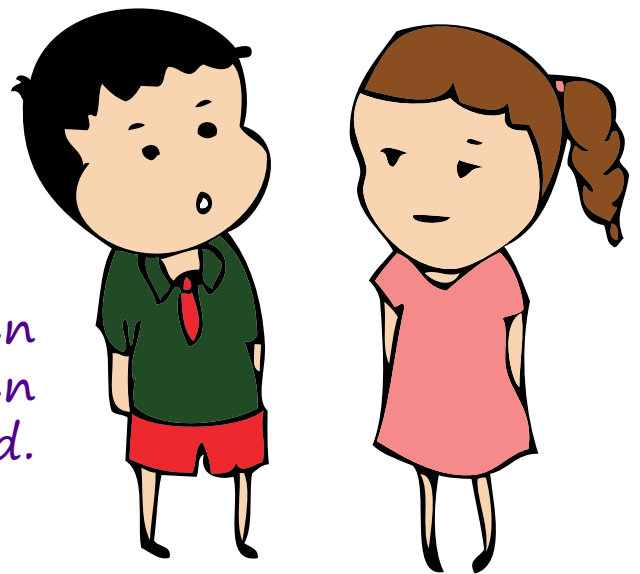


What I want from others



Sometimes I don't want to talk about it; I need to have privacy.

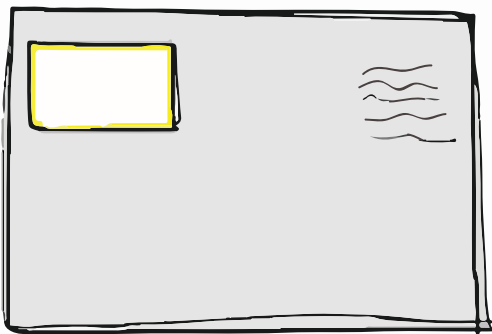
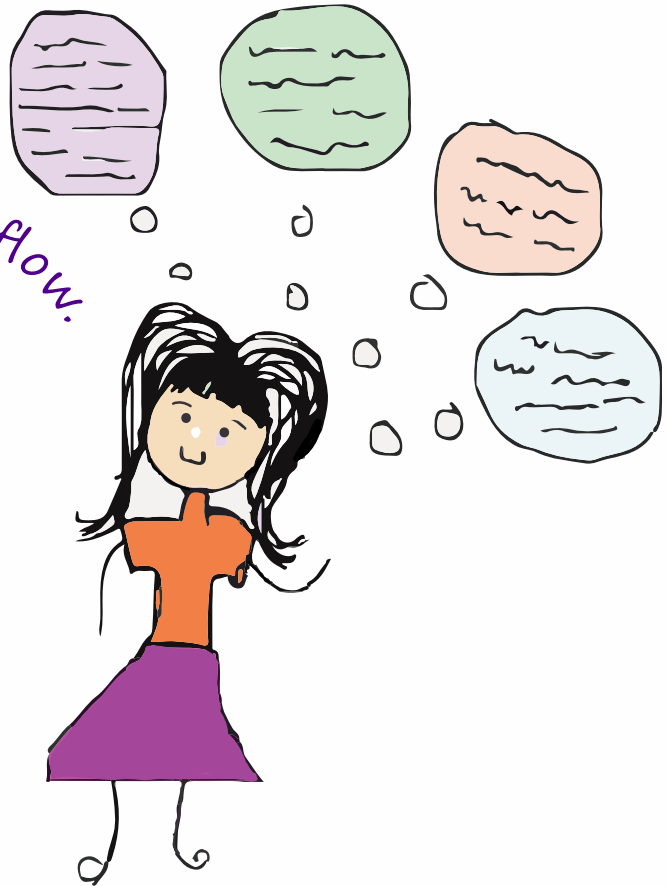
I like it when people listen and I like it when they understand.



Friendly smiles are nice.

What helps me

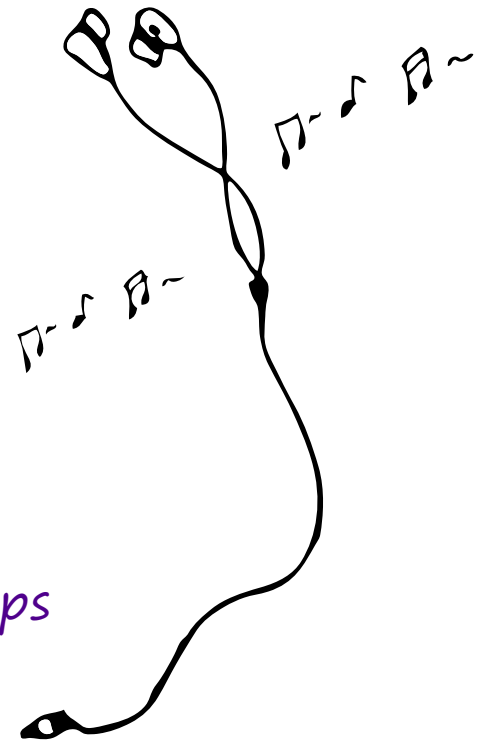
Relax and let your thoughts flow.



Writing letters

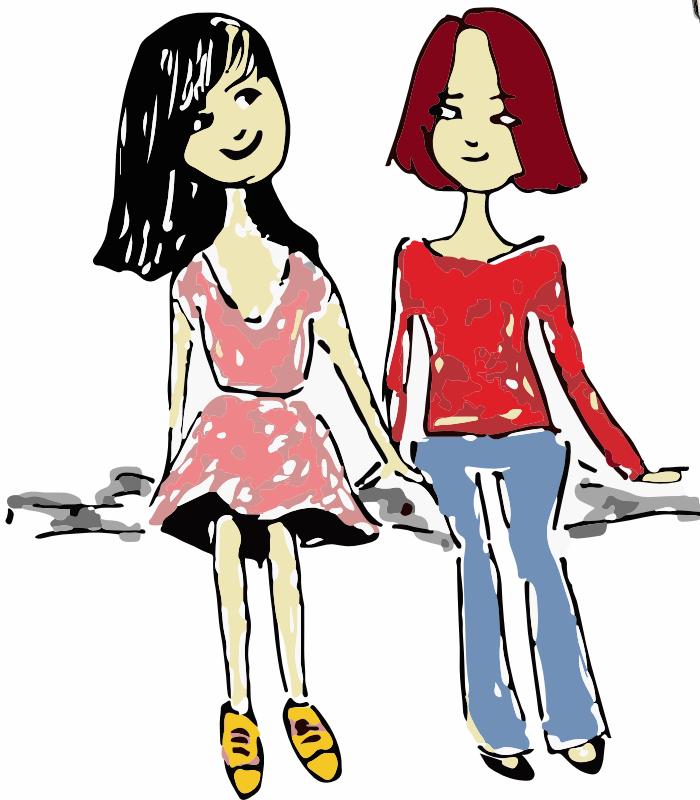
to nowhere.

Listening to music helps
me handle situations.



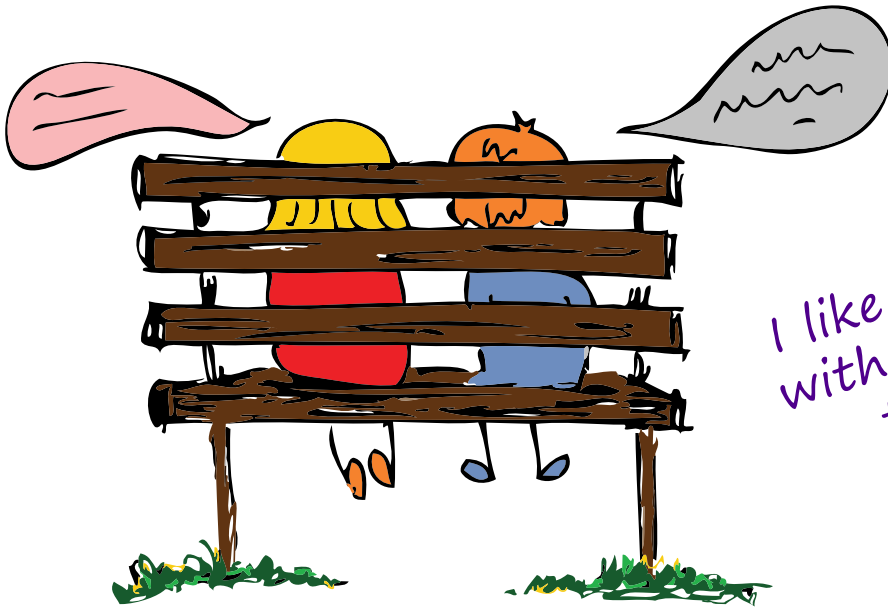
What helps me

Patting my cats and talking to them about it helps me remember some good moments.



My friend and I tell each other everything – the good and the bad.

What helps me



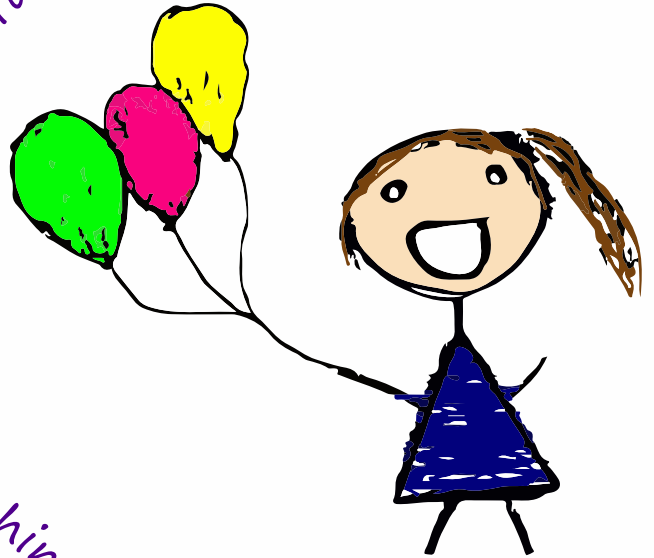
I like to spend time with one friend and talk about it.



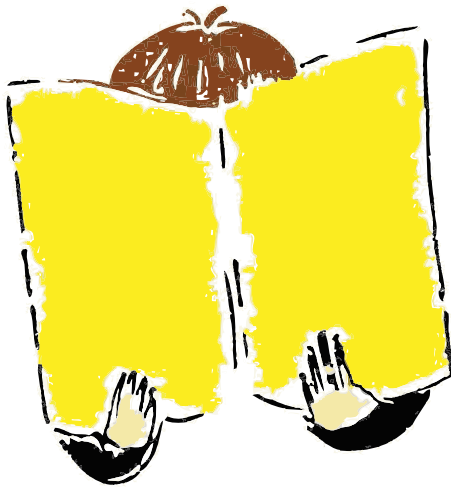
One time I was having a lot of trouble so I went to my friend's house and we went to the park and he just listened to my whole story then tried to make me feel better, but just being able to get the whole story out takes a big load off.

What helps me

Doing fun things.



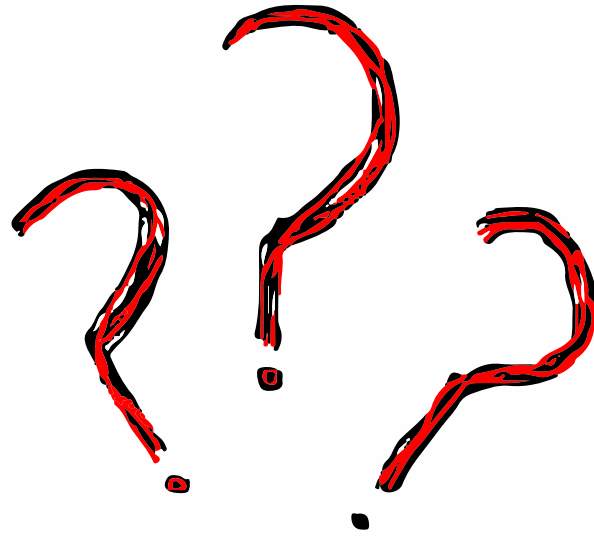
Reading keeps my mind off things.



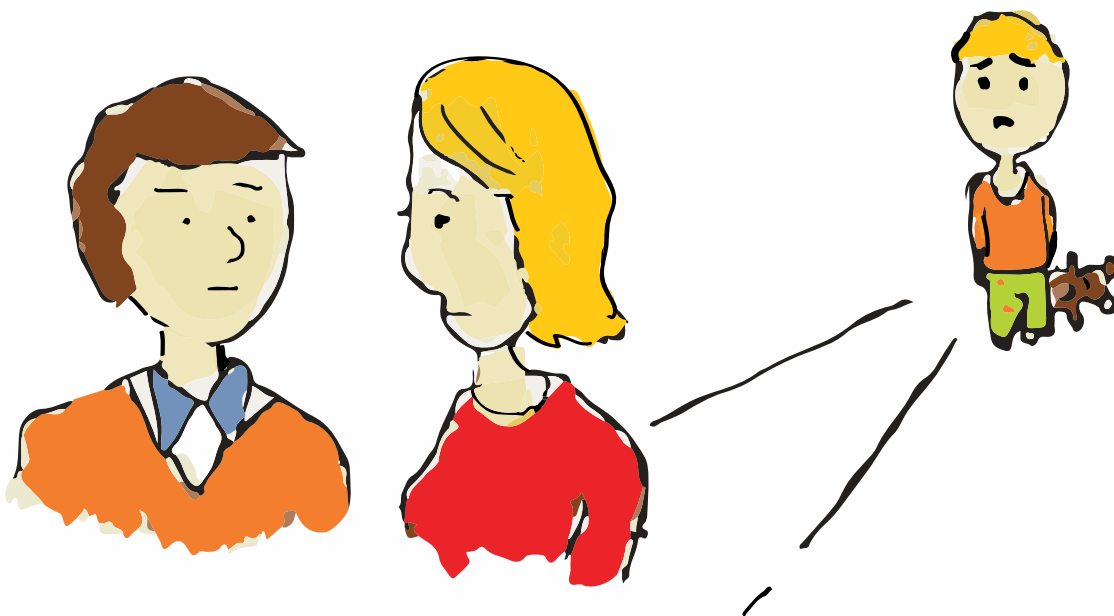
Talking to my kitten because she doesn't talk back.



Young people and the right to be included



Please tell me what's happening. Even if you don't have all the answers, tell me what you know.



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

Young people and the right to be included

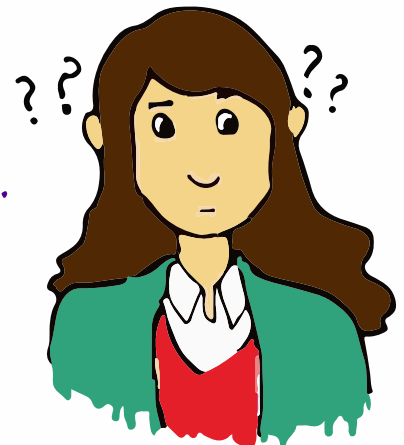
When someone goes missing everyone thinks about the adults and they think the kids are too young to understand.



Young people matter too.



I had no idea what was going on.



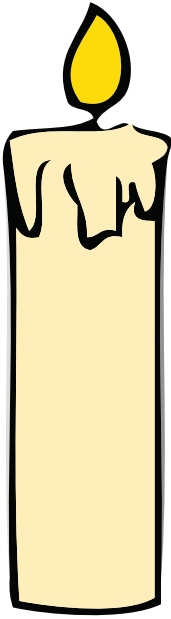
Reminders

Dear Uncle Ian,
For your birthday we
had a Party. your family
and friends came to
celebrate your birthday and
think of you. We all miss
you. lots of Love from Emily and
every one who came.
xoxox

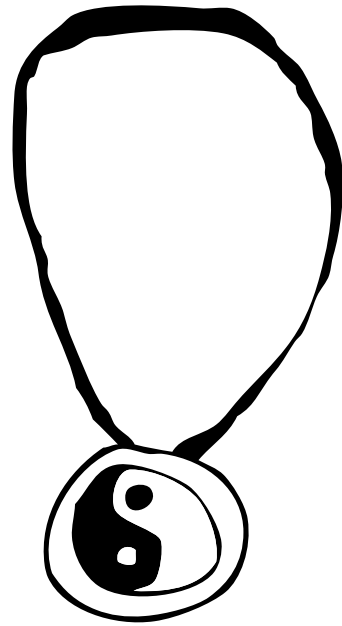


Emily (age 6)

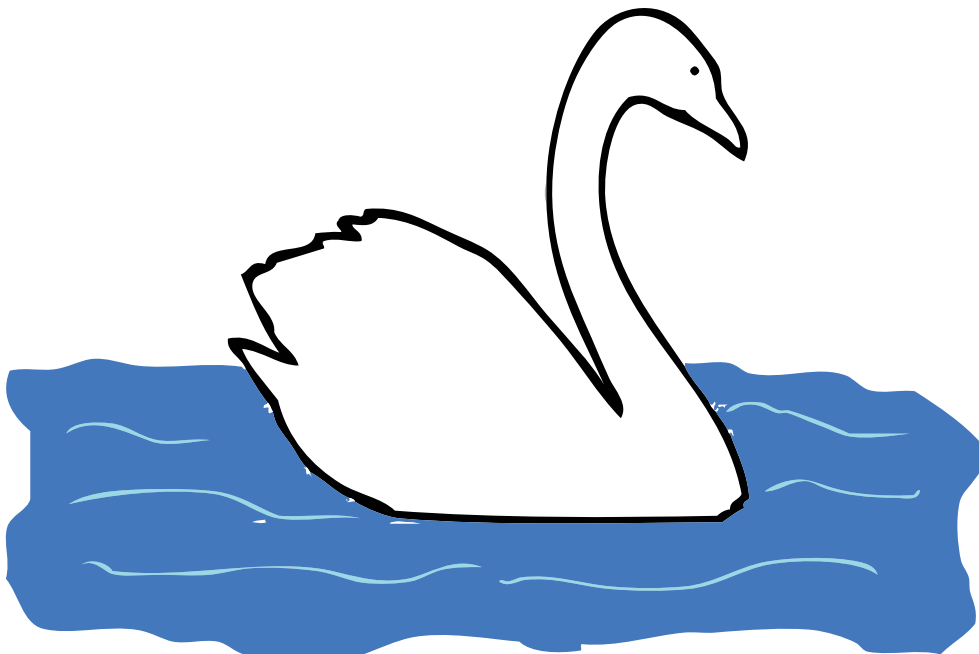
Reminders



Your birthday...



The necklace you gave me...



The swan...

Lucy's story

Lucy jumped awake and looked around in the dark. She recognised the familiar shape of the lamp on her desk and the light from the hall under her bedroom door.

She'd been dreaming...not a scary dream, just a dream.

In her dream, Dad walked through the front door, smiled at her and said he'd been fishing up north. Nothing too out of the ordinary.

Lucy had felt a wave of relief sweep through her body. Lucy also felt just a shiver of anger at dad. Why hadn't he rung, even once, sent a postcard or even a text?

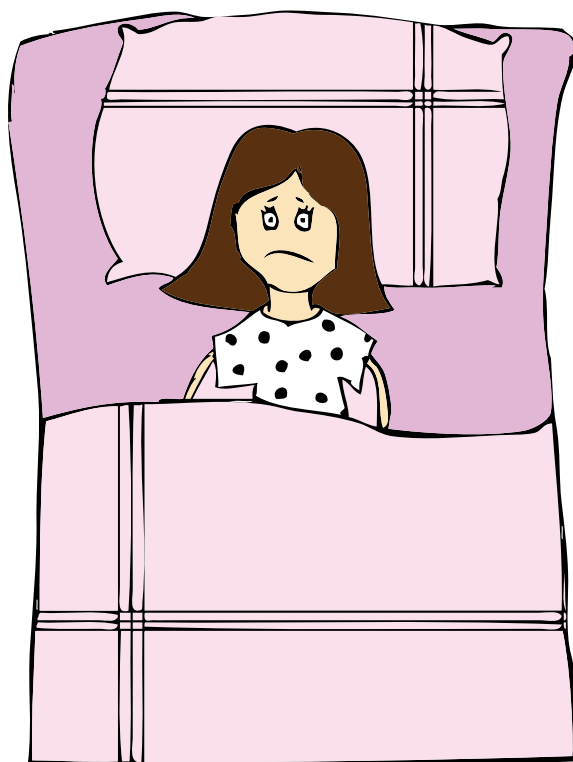
She wondered if Dad knew just how many people were really worried about him. She wondered if he knew that Mum and Nick, Dad's brother, had taken a photo of him when they went to talk to the police. Mum chose it because it was a "good likeness." It showed Dad standing next to Pop's fishing boat with his hand on her brother, Josh's shoulder. Josh was holding up a fish he'd caught, smiling with his front tooth missing.

In her dream she wondered if Dad knew that he was listed as a 'missing person' and there was a picture of him on the Internet.

But at least he's now home. Lucy couldn't wait to tell her Mum. She pictured her Mum coming home from work, dropping her bag and maybe some groceries in the usual place - the floor, putting the kettle on and then walking into the TV room to see Dad sitting there, like he always did on his days off.

Lucy hasn't seen her dad for more than six months. He went out one morning in the car to see his mate and just didn't come home. His mate hadn't seen him either. There had been no sign of him.

Lucy thought she saw him once when she was out with her mum. They had turned around and hurried back to check but it wasn't Dad. It felt like she could almost 'taste' the bitterness of the disappointment and the tears she blinked away. She didn't let on. She shrugged her shoulders and laughed (a little hollow laugh) at the way they had stared at a complete stranger.



But it was all a dream...

Sometimes it just felt like last week since Lucy had seen Dad but other times it felt like years had passed. Sometimes she found it difficult to remember just what he looked like and how he sounded, but then she'd look at the album she had with the photos of their last holiday up north. Dad had really enjoyed that holiday and had seemed really happy. He had talked about moving up north to live.

In the album there were photos of him holding her when she was a baby. There was even one where he looked like he was crying. When she asked mum about that, Mum had said that was just after she'd been born and Dad had been crying with happiness. The album was something she pulled out when she wanted to remember exactly what Dad looked like, because although she knew what he looked like, she could look at the photos and see the differences and sameness in him. The times when he was fatter or thinner, when his hair was longer. She wondered what he looked like now. If he hadn't had a haircut his hair would be really long. Did he have a beard, and would anyone recognise him if he looked different from the photos the police had?

There were other things that reminded her of Dad. One of the things she kept in a secret place was Dad's favourite fishing cap - a crumpled old thing with a hole in it. It smelt like the shampoo Dad used. Looking at it made her feel a mix of happy and sad.

Why had he left it behind if he was fishing?

Lucy worried that if Dad stayed away much longer she might not be able to remember him at all. She worried that he might forget her. He had already missed her birthday and his own birthday. That had been really hard. On his birthday Mum, Josh and Lucy had gone to see Pop and they'd talked about Dad and fishing and other times they'd shared.

Lucy had seen her Dad cry at other times too. She didn't always understand what was going on and why he seemed unhappy. She had wanted to ask but had thought "maybe not" because she didn't want to make her Mum worried. After a while she didn't ask, but she wondered whether Dad being sad and sometimes "not quite himself" had something to do with him going away. She would ask him one day.

Mum had guessed how worried Lucy was and had admitted to Lucy that she was worried too - the "not able to think straight or eat or sleep or think about anything else" type of worry. When she was able to sleep, there were times when she would wake up crying.

She and Mum agreed that "not knowing" was the hardest part.

She had been so worried that something bad had happened to him; like someone had hurt him, he was lost or maybe he'd hurt himself. Sometimes she had fears she couldn't even put into words. It felt like if she did they might come true, even though her brain knew that just thinking something couldn't really make it happen.

Lucy wondered if maybe she'd done something that had really upset Dad or made him mad. Like fighting with Josh over something on Christmas Day. Now she couldn't even remember what the fight was about. She just remembers Dad saying couldn't they be nice to each other and at the time thinking why should this day be any different. Her brother was so annoying but she knew that he was worried too although he showed it in different ways. There were days when he was really quiet and others when he was just like he had always been. A bit like her. She still had homework to do, sleep overs with friends from school, chores around the house.

Lucy discovered that talking about her Dad helped a bit. It didn't take the sadness away but talking with Mum and sometimes with Pop was a help. They seemed to understand. They knew what 'not knowing' felt like. Her friends at school mostly didn't get it and sometimes it seemed harder to tell than just stay silent and when anybody asked about her Dad Lucy just said he was "away on business" or she avoided the question. She worried that if she told they would ask all sorts of questions she didn't know the answers to; and all the questions she asked herself like why did he go, where was he and would he come back?



Information for young people and adults

When someone we know or love goes missing we may feel frightened, confused and overwhelmed.

It can be hard to think about anything else and the thought of the person not being found safe and well can be too frightening to even think about.

If you're a young person you may not be aware of what's happening at first. This can be for all sorts of reasons:

- The adults don't know what to say or how to say it.
- They don't want to worry or upset you.
- They may be hoping the person returns before they need to worry you by telling you about their fears or that they have made a missing persons report to the police.
- They don't know what's happening and find it difficult to tell someone else when they don't know what's happening themselves.
- They might think you're too young to be told.
- Often adults are used to being able to provide answers and when someone is missing there are sometimes no answers.

What do I tell others? How do I answer their questions?

When a loved one is missing it can be difficult to know how to explain what's happening when much of what is happening is unclear or unknown. It can be really difficult to talk about your loved one being missing. You might worry about being able to control your emotion. The person receiving the information may respond in a way that disappoints or upsets you, sometimes because they are at a loss to know what to say.

There is always someone who will listen - a parent or other relative, a friend, teacher or counsellor. There can be others who find it difficult to know what to say and they can sometimes make you feel uncomfortable.

Some suggestions:

- Keep it very simple. Talking about a missing loved one is really hard to do.
- If there are people you want to tell, or think need to know, you can talk to someone you trust about how you might tell them.
- It's better to start with the truth. If you hide the truth, you hide how you are feeling.

- Expressing your feelings is important. You can do this by talking, or keeping a diary or drawing a picture.
- Write down any questions you have. This will help you remember them when you want to ask about what is happening.

Remember:

- It's not your fault that someone you love is missing.
- Don't be afraid to ask the adults around you for information about the investigation and what is happening. It is better to hear the truth than to 'fill in the gaps' by guessing or imagining what might have happened.
- It's all right to say "we don't know where he/she is."
- You don't have to tell everyone. It's all right to say, "I don't feel like talking about it."

Adults

- Keep your explanation simple and truthful. Stick to the information that's known.
- It's all right to say 'I don't know' if you really don't know.
- Don't make things up in an attempt to be reassuring for the young person; or try to 'guess' what has happened.
- It can be very hard to start a conversation about a missing loved one with a young person but not as hard as having to carry on as if nothing is wrong.
- It is all right for young people to see you upset. It gives them permission to be honest in expressing their emotions.
- Young people usually know when the adults around them are upset and worried. Trying to hide what you're feeling can lead to young people feeling excluded and can cause them more anxiety in return. They may become more watchful and look for whispered conversations and the adults being upset.
- Young people may try to 'fill in the gaps' if they're not kept informed about what is happening. If they fear information is being withheld they may imagine it's too awful for them to be told the truth. Their imaginations may lead them to images and conclusions that are vivid and disturbing when there is no evidence to support this.
- Reassure the young person that you're not going anywhere. Young people may worry that if this can happen to someone they care about, it can also happen to another person close to them.

How long will it last? What has happened to the missing person? Why did he/she go? Is he/she alive or dead?

'Ambiguous loss' is a term that is used to describe the type of loss that occurs when someone is missing. When someone we care about is missing, these questions and many others arise. There are few clear answers. It is difficult to understand and explain.

Understanding the term helps to explain the difficulties people experience when someone they care about is missing.

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU)

FFMPU offers information, counselling and support to young people and adults when someone is missing. You can talk to a counsellor on:

Phone (9am to 5pm, Mon to Fri)..... 1800 227 772

Email ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

Website..... www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who contributed to this book through their words and original artwork, especially Emily, Lily, Izi and Max (below from left to right).



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