

Responding to callers who have someone missing?

As telephone or on-line counsellors you may be contacted by people who have someone missing in their lives. The following information sheet identifies ways to help these clients and provides information about the impact of missing on those left behind.

Missing persons in Australia

Approximately 35,000 people are reported missing each year to police and other search agencies. Researchers estimate that for each person who goes missing at least 12 people will be adversely impacted.¹ This means that each year in Australia almost half a million people will be impacted by the disappearance of a loved one. Families and friends left behind may approach a variety of agencies for practical advice and emotional support when a loved one disappears.

The impact of missing on those left behind

Some of the challenges faced by families and friends of missing persons may include:

- Not knowing what to do, how to search, or who to talk to for help. Families may require practical advice about search options, missing persons' agencies and avenues for support.
- High levels of psychological and emotional distress and disruption in their lives.
- The experience of missing is often referred to as an ambiguous or unresolved loss. This loss differs from bereavement, as there is no certainty about the whereabouts of a loved one. Facing the possibility of never knowing what happened to the missing person can be frightening – *"not knowing is the hardest thing."*
- Many families describe their experience when someone is missing as an *'emotional roller-coaster'*. Rapid and unexpected emotional changes are not uncommon.
- Families may face constant reminders such as anniversaries, possible sightings, reports of a body being found, all of which may trigger ups and downs emotionally.

- Recurrent distressing and intrusive thoughts or images about what they imagine has happened to the missing person.
- Families may face challenging and potentially distressing events such as media involvement or coronial investigations.
- The experience of missing can feel isolating. Families report feeling judged, ignored, avoided, and hearing unhelpful comments from others. A lack of rituals available within the community to recognise that a loved one is missing can cause further distress.
- The loss can impact on their capacity to: work or remain financially stable, maintain significant relationships or engage in activities they once enjoyed. They may face financial difficulties, physical health problems including interrupted sleep and loss of appetite. They may also neglect their own self-care.

Key facts about police missing persons' reports

- The NSW Police definition of a missing person is: *"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."*
- Families DO NOT have to wait any period of time before lodging a missing person's report to police; as soon as there are reasonable fears for a person's wellbeing they can lodge a report
- Families can make a report by attending their local police station, regardless of where the person went missing
- You do not have to be a family member to report a person missing to police
- A person can be reported missing more than once
- Police cannot search for family members in circumstances where there are no real concerns for their safety, such as families searching for someone for debt collection or when they have just dropped out of, or have chosen to discontinue contact with someone.

- Some families may share that they have someone 'missing' in their lives but the circumstances might be of family disconnection. They can be referred to Salvation Army Family Tracing Services for search support (see *Where to get help* section below).

What to do if a caller has a loved one who is missing

Be aware:

- There is no rulebook for 'missing' and no right or wrong way to feel. Every person will respond differently. Try to be respectful of these individual differences.
- Families say that it helps them when service providers have an awareness of missing persons' issues and ambiguous loss. Resources for Counsellors are listed at the end of this document.
- It can be challenging to provide support when someone goes missing. Families may contact you in a high level of distress with numerous complex issues. Counsellors may find it difficult to be asked questions they may not have the answers to, such as what they think has happened to the missing person. It can be a confronting realisation that counsellors may be unable to answer questions, "solve" a problem, or understand why someone has gone missing. For clinical guidance around working with families of missing, counsellors can contact FFMPU on:

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

What to say:

- Reaching out for support is an important step towards breaking the social isolation that can accompany missing. It is essential for counsellors to reflect on the positive nature of the caller's choice to make contact for assistance. Encourage callers to also reach out to, and accept help from family and friends where possible.
- Ask what prompted their call to you. Some callers require practical assistance with understanding search options, legal matters, or information about the missing persons' sector, while others may be reaching out for crisis or emotional support, or a mix of both. Match your response to their identified needs.
- Use reflective listening and non-judgmental responses to explore their experiences.
- Families report that being linked in quickly with agencies that understand missing can be important in helping them feel as though they are

not alone. Check they are aware of the missing persons' support agencies listed in the *Where to get help* section of this document.

- Families left behind may face a whole host of difficulties when someone goes missing, from legal and financial difficulties to workplace and/or emotional challenges. Ask about the challenges they are facing and explore appropriate referral options to respond to these needs.
- Reinforce self-care strategies. Self-care often takes a 'back seat' when someone goes missing. It may be helpful to remind them of the importance of trying to maintain healthy sleeping, eating, and exercise patterns to help keep them going.
- Normalise their responses to the trauma of having someone missing. Each person responds differently. It is not uncommon to experience a whole range of confusing and distressing emotions when confronted by ambiguous loss. Reinforce the importance of talking about what they are going through.

What not to say

- Don't offer your own theories or jump to conclusions about what you think has happened to the missing person. If families ask you for your opinion, explain that it would not be helpful to them for you to suggest ideas not based on facts or evidence. Any ideas or questions the family raises about the missing person should be referred back to the officer in charge of the investigation.
- Hope is a concept continually raised by families. It is important for counsellors to acknowledge that hope can be a survival strategy for those living with ambiguous loss, particularly in the long term. Do not focus on trying to extinguish their hope.
- Do not assume that 'time alone' will improve their experience. Families may face unhelpful comments like they should 'just get over it' if a loved one has been missing for a long time. Refrain from judgments about how they are responding emotionally in dealing with ambiguous loss.
- Be careful of using terms like 'closure'. Be mindful that without the location of a missing person there may be no closure for many families. Missing does not fit within traditional grief and loss models, which focus on concepts such as closure. Families need to know that in reaching out for support the trauma of 'missing' will be acknowledged rather than the need for closure that many service providers believe is important.

Where to get help

Support for families and friends of missing persons

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), NSW Department of Justice

If the family requires support and they live in NSW, or the person disappeared from NSW, refer the family to FFMPU. FFMPU provides information, support and referrals regarding missing persons' issues in NSW. We do not search for people.

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

Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

Web: www.missingperson.justice.nsw.gov.au

National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), Australian Federal Police

If the family is in another state or territory and requires support they can contact NMPCC for advice.

Phone: 1800 000 634

Web: www.missingperson.gov.au

Search Options

NSW Police

If the caller has concerns for the safety of the person who is missing they can attend their local police station to lodge a missing person's report. It will help if they are able to take with them a current photo of the missing person, identification and any other useful documents to assist in the search.

If the caller has questions about an ongoing police missing person's investigation refer them to the police officer handling the investigation.

For information about ways that families can access their state or territory missing persons unit go to:

Web: <http://www.missingpersons.gov.au/report-a-missing-person/filing-report/unit.aspx>

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

Facebook www.facebook.com/missing.501 • **Email** ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

Salvation Army Family Tracing Service (SAFTS)

If the caller is requesting help in locating and reconnecting with adult family members they may have lost contact with, refer them to the SAFTS in their local state.

Phone: (02) 9211 0277 (SAFTS NSW)

Web: www.salvos.org.au/familytracing

Other search agencies are listed on the FFMPU website;

Web: www.missingperson.justice.nsw.gov.au

Resources for counsellors and families

Counsellors can contact FFMPU for clinical or referral advice and access the FFMPU website (see above) for further resources.

Promoting connectedness

Guidelines for health care professionals working with families and friends of missing persons is available online:

Web: http://www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons/ffmpu_providers.html,c=y

Supporting Those who are left Behind

This National Counselling Framework is available online at:

Web: <http://www.missingpersons.gov.au/education--training/working-with-families.aspx>

¹ James M, Anderson J & Putt J 2008, Missing Persons in Australia, Trends and Issues In Criminal Justice no. 353. Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, ACT.