

## Responding to callers who may be missing persons or at risk of going missing: Guide for telephone & online counsellors

As telephone or on-line counsellors, you may be contacted by people who are missing persons or at risk of going missing. The following information sheet identifies ways to help these clients and provides information about missing persons' issues.

### What is missing?

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."*<sup>1</sup>

The police are the main agency for dealing with missing persons' incidents, however, families may search for individuals through non-police tracing agencies.

### The statistics

#### In NSW

Between January and December 2011 in NSW 12,278 were reported missing to police:

- Over 99% (12 231) were found
- 82 people were found deceased
- 47 remained missing by May 2012.<sup>2</sup>

#### National estimates

The estimated number of people reported missing in Australia to police and other search agencies for the period 2005–2006 was approximately 35,000, with the majority of police missing persons being located within a short period of time.<sup>3</sup> The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police (NMPCC) estimates there to be 1600 unsolved 'long-term' missing persons cases in Australia, where the person remains missing for more than six months.<sup>4</sup>

### Who goes 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:<sup>3</sup>

- 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 illness may lead to missing episodes as it can impact on problem solving capabilities and the ability to cope with daily life.
- Older people with dementia or memory loss. People experiencing dementia related illnesses may be more likely to wander and can be vulnerable if not found quickly.

A number of people may go missing whose situation is never reported to police; for example people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) backgrounds and homeless people.<sup>3</sup>

### Why do people go missing?

It is important not to jump to conclusions about why someone has gone missing. Some people go missing intentionally because they have made the decision that they need to spend time away from their usual lives; some might go missing involuntarily. 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.<sup>3, 5</sup>

### What to do if you think someone may be at risk of going missing

#### Be aware of:

- Language that indicates a desire to get away, escape, or 'disappear' from their life or the troubles they are experiencing. Many people may not use the term 'missing'.
- High-risk groups of people who go missing who may need further questioning to explore their level of support and coping strategies.

- Some callers may find that leaving a situation may be the safest option for them or may allow 'time out' to help them cope with a difficulty they are facing, while others may be vulnerable to harm if they leave their usual supports. How you respond will depend on the unique circumstances of the caller.
- Understand that callers may be concerned about privacy and may not wish to answer all questions. Tell callers about your confidentiality policies and let callers know they can choose not to answer questions.

### What to say:

- Ask what prompted their call to you. Reinforce the positive nature of their reaching out for support.
- Let the caller know that you are concerned about their well being and are taking what they are saying seriously.
- Asking questions about their current safety, age, emotional and physical health, and any problems they are facing, may help identify the most appropriate supports available for their situation. Explore referral options with them, including referrals if they need to leave an unsafe situation.
- Ask about their current supports (friends, family, service providers). Who or what do they identify as their main supports? How could they be helpful at present? What other supports may be helpful at this time?
- Ask about the strengths and coping strategies they have used through difficulties in the past. What has worked for them? What might they put in place now?
- Explore alternate options to going missing (where appropriate), for example:
  - ↳ They may choose to disconnect from some people but stay in contact with others they trust.
  - ↳ There may be someone, such as a friend or counsellor, they can speak to about what they are going through.
  - ↳ Can they tell people they need 'time out' or limited contact for some period of time? For example, contact by email, phone, or no contact for some identified period.
- Ask about previous missing experiences: Have they gone missing before? What was helpful/unhelpful? Is there anything they might do differently?
- If they are determined to leave their current situation:
  - ↳ Explore what they can put in place to keep them safe. Identify steps to access housing, health, finances, employment, or counselling supports. Some people may find it helpful to carry 'key' support information with them at all times, for example emergency housing contacts.
  - ↳ Ask if there is anyone they trust to check in with and say they are ok (even if they don't disclose their location). This might prevent a police missing person's report being made.
  - ↳ Some people may have high risk factors if they leave their normal lives. For example if they suddenly stop taking medications. They may need to plan how to reduce these risks.
  - ↳ Explore the possibility that they may choose to return in the future. Ask what steps they can take to make this transition less difficult, for example, do they need to give notice at work, organise finances, or arrange carers for dependents?
- Always use standard suicide risk assessment methods and ask about suicidal thoughts or feelings. Talking about going missing or 'escaping life' may be an indicator of suicidal thoughts or intent.

### What not to say:

- Try to avoid judgmental statements about what caller should or should not do. Aim to explore options to keep the caller safe rather than convincing them to stay in or leave a particular situation.
- Try not to use language that uses guilt or shame to influence the person's decision. Exacerbating guilt may, for some individuals, increase a desire to escape a situation.

## Where to get help

### Seeking support, information and referral about missing persons' issues

#### Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU)

Any person with a missing persons' question, including a counsellor, is welcome to contact the FFMPU, NSW Department of Justice. FFMPU provides information, support, and referrals regarding missing persons issues in NSW.

**Phone:** 1800 227 772

**Web:** [www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)

#### Checking the police missing persons' register

If the caller wishes to check if they are a missing person they can speak to their local police for advice or the relevant state police missing persons unit (where they were last seen or known to reside).

#### NSW Police Missing Persons Unit

**Phone:** 1800 025 091

Profiles of some missing persons' cases may also be registered on the relevant state Missing Persons Unit websites or the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre website. Only missing persons' profiles with authority for publicity are published to police websites.

#### National Missing Persons Coordination Centre

**Web:** [www.missingpersons.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.gov.au)

### Search Options

If the caller wishes help in locating and reconnecting with adult family members they are estranged from, refer them to the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service in their local state.

### 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](https://www.facebook.com/missing.501) • **Email** [ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au)

[www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)

#### Salvation Army Family Tracing Service NSW

**Phone:** (02) 9211 0277

**Web:** [www.salvos.org.au/familytracing](http://www.salvos.org.au/familytracing)

Other search agencies are listed on the FFMPU website:

**Web:** [www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)

### Other support options

When someone is missing, or at risk of going missing, they may need support from variety of individuals or agencies. Additional support agencies are listed on the FFMPU website.

#### Yfoundations

A peak body that seeks to end youth homelessness and aims to represent the needs of young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Contact:

**Phone:** 1800 424 830

#### Homeless Persons Information Centre (HPIC)

Provides information and referrals for clients seeking accommodation and support services within NSW.

**Phone:** (02) 1800 234 566 (7 days)

**Web:** [www.salvos.org.au/familytracing](http://www.salvos.org.au/familytracing)

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- 1 NSW Police Missing Persons Unit website:  
[http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/community\\_issues/missing\\_persons](http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/community_issues/missing_persons)
  - 2 Mark McDonald, Lecturer, CSU, School of Policing Studies, NSW Police College.
  - 3 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.
  - 4 National Missing Persons Coordination Centre website:  
<http://www.missingpersons.gov.au/missing-persons/overview.aspx>
  - 5 Henderson, M & Henderson, P. (1998). Missing People: Issues for the Australian Community, National Missing Persons Unit and Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, Canberra, ACT.

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