



Justice
Families & Friends
of Missing Persons

Promoting Connectedness

Guidelines for working with families
of missing people

This booklet was produced by

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit,
NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice

Further copies may be obtained from

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit
Locked Bag 5118
Parramatta NSW 2124

P: 1800 227 772

E: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

W: www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

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Introduction

These guidelines have been developed to support those working with people affected by the loss of a missing person.

A broad range of service providers may benefit from using these guidelines to deliver evidence-based support.

The guidelines may act as a flexible guide about the ways in which families of missing people communicate their needs following the disappearance. The guidelines also acknowledge the differing skill set and expertise demonstrated by professionals, building on the tools already utilised by workers in their designated roles.

The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice developed this document after reviewing the current national and international literature available, through consultation with families and friends of missing people and exploring the suggestions made by those with expert knowledge in the field of missing persons.

In consulting families of missing people for the development of these guidelines individuals identified that their primary contact for support was made through their general practitioner or to a mental health professional or counsellor.

Families of missing people have shared that in reaching out for support they were often met with ambiguity or confusion by professionals they believed could support them.

For more information about the impact of 'missing' on families and the relevant therapy models available please visit the following sites:

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

Website www.missingpersons.gov.au/supporting

NOTE: For the purpose of this framework references to 'families' or 'family' have been used to define anyone that has a close relationship with the person that is missing.

The missing persons experience

A missing person is defined as an individual whose current whereabouts are unknown and there are concerns for their safety and wellbeing (AIC 2008). Thirty-five thousand people are reported missing in Australia each year and those left behind can experience sudden and profound reactions when the loss remains unresolved. For each person reported missing at least 12 people will be adversely impacted and these individuals may approach a variety of agencies for assistance with the practical and emotional aspects that accompany a missing persons investigation.

The NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice (DAGJ) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP), in response to missing persons in the Australian community, have developed many useful resources to address the growing awareness of the incidence of missing persons and the destabilising and potentially devastating impact on those left behind.

More information about the missing persons' population in Australia can be found in Missing Persons in Australia (James M, Anderson J & Putt J 2008). You can access this report on the following website:

Australian Institute of Criminology

Website www.aic.gov.au

Guideline 1: The symptomology of unresolved loss

People's reactions to the disappearance of a missing person may be influenced by the reasons the person may be missing. People may go missing due to mental health concerns, dementia or Alzheimer's related illnesses, possible suicide, possible homicide or people fleeing violence, abuse or neglect.

The experience of families of missing people should be viewed as a significant life trauma, where support might be necessary to allow people to survive the ambiguous loss of a person.

Some emerging behaviours, or changes in behaviour, might indicate the need for follow up or referral to an appropriate agency. These symptoms might include:

- A pervading sense of anxiety, guilt or hopelessness
- A feeling of being frozen to the place and time when the person disappeared.
- *People often say to me 'oh, get over it' but you don't get over it, you just get used to it. There's not a day that goes past where I (don't) think 'oh I wonder what's happened', its just a huge unanswered question, until you know you'll never, ever stop thinking about it. (DAGJ 2005)*
- An inability to experience joy from normally pleasurable activities (similar to a presentation of anhedonia), a feeling of being numb to the life that surrounds them.
- Intense psychological or emotional distress as a response to 'not knowing' the fate of the missing person regardless of how long the person may have been missing.
- Recurrent, distressing and often unwanted intrusive thoughts or images about the missing person.
- Isolation or detachment from the person's local community – families often speak of a wall of silence that surrounds them when a person is missing, a sense that the community no longer knows how to engage with them.
- A feeling of impending doom stemming from thoughts of the imagined traumas about the fate of the missing person.

It was difficult particularly not knowing what he had done to himself. If I had known it was instantaneous. To think that he might have suffered was really awful. That worried me ... that I didn't know how it had happened. (DAGJ 2005)

- Generalised fear caused by a change in a person's worldview, a sense that the world is no longer a safe place. This may also challenge a person's view of their self or their faith and religiosity.
- Somatic complaints that may include digestive system problems, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, nausea, dizziness, lethargy, aches and pains. Families should be encouraged to attend their general practitioner for follow up in the first instance
- Long-term hypervigilance – families have shared that they need to remain alert and aware for long periods of time readying themselves for the potential location of the missing person.
- Triggers from previous traumas – an episode of missing may trigger a reaction to previous bereavements, conflicts or challenges due to the historical relationship with the missing person.
- Changing concepts of hope – families may present with multiple views about what happened to the missing person.

Over the years (my) definition of hope has changed from hope of a reunion, to hope for information, which will finally become hope of a resolution. (DAGJ 2005)

- Interruption to usual sleep and eating patterns and an inability to manage the day-to-day activities previously managed prior to the disappearance.
- Financial and practical stressors – an inability to work or attend school, challenges in managing day to day tasks or even refusal to return home whilst the missing person is not yet located.
- Reduced interest and engagement with other activities or demands of life. This may narrow a family's identity to viewing themselves only as a family member of a missing person
- Avoidance behaviours – families may not be prepared to discuss the possibilities of what may have happened to the missing person for fear that this signals they have given up hope.

I don't want his remains to be identified. It's going to open up another door for me. I know he's gone but I just think of him being in New York City, running around and having a good time and he just hasn't called me yet, that's all. (AFP 2007)

Guideline 2: Understanding the trauma experience

Losing a missing person, for both short and long periods, is an event for which the community is unprepared and often unable to conceptualise. Traumas, where the outcomes are clearer or their impacts easily explained, are often more accepted (albeit just as painful) than the loss experienced when a person is unable to be located.

The experiences differ from a sudden bereavement due to the very nature of their ambiguity.

Boss (1999) defines ambiguous loss as baffling and immobilising and shares that families cannot 'problem solve' the loss because they 'do not know yet whether the problem (the loss) is final or temporary'.

- The experience of the loss is dependant on a number of factors:
- The closeness of relationship between the person and the missing person.
- The details of the disappearance – potential homicide and suicide cases where the missing person's remains are not located do not truly allow people to explore the impact of their bereavement.
- The response to the family by law enforcement agencies.
- The additional losses a person may have experienced previously.
- The ways in which the community has acknowledged their loss – intense media scrutiny or linking cases with historical investigations can be destabilising and traumatic.

Guideline 3: What professionals can do

Service providers can provide assistance to families of missing people through monitoring the ways in which they are coping with their loss and acting as gateways to services with expertise in the missing persons sector. Families consulted for the development of these guidelines spoke about wanting to be 'linked in' quickly with specific missing persons' services.

It is vital for agencies to promote connectedness and hopefulness for individuals in order for them to live with their loss.

The promotion of hopefulness needs to encapsulate whatever definition of hope the family member is holding on to at any given time – labelling hope as false or inappropriate may further alienate people whose losses remain unresolved.

Service providers in primary and secondary health care can assist by promoting the resilience of family members particularly in the early days of a disappearance.

It may be useful for service providers to:

- Explore their own reactions to ambiguity – the responses to a survey conducted for the purposes of these guidelines highlighted the lack of knowledge or the focus on solutions used by services when responding to families of missing people.
- Provide advice and manage the symptoms of missing by acknowledging the anxiety and confusion that accompanies the disappearance of a person
- Monitor the ways in which the individual is coping over time and refer to mental health support or specialised missing persons counselling services when the individual consistently presents with high levels of distress or anxiety
- Understand the need for practical guidance in understanding the status of investigations and the need for the individual to regularly consult with the officer in charge of the investigation.
- Limit the requirement for individuals to retell the details of their story if the telling is not for therapeutic purposes. Detailed referral letters may help dispense with the retelling of the story that can lead to fatigue and distress
- Limit use of the words ‘closure’, ‘acceptance’ or ‘resolution’. The experience of ‘missing’ needs to be acknowledged as the trauma, not the potential outcomes or fate of the missing person.
- Explore with the individual the options they have to remain connected or become connected within their communities. Ask them about ways in which their experiences could be shared with others in a safe and productive way.
- Explore the ways in which individuals could adapt to the changes within their lives – help them understand ways to live alongside the trauma of having someone missing

Guideline 4: What is most helpful?

Families have shared that the following support was useful during their journey of having someone missing:

- An understanding about the appropriate counselling models relevant to the experience of missing.
- The opportunity to talk and acknowledge the loss of the missing person.
- An understanding from primary health care providers of the need to share the physical and emotional impact that missing has had on them.
- Support that was encouraging yet respectful to the differing reactions that families of missing people experience.
- Practical assistance with legal matters, investigative enquiries and details about issues relating to the missing person. (for more information about referral options see p.13)
- Being linked in with support quickly so that people knew they were not alone.
- Understanding that ambiguous or unresolved loss is a type of trauma that is challenging to live with.
- Increased media and community awareness about the number of people who go missing and the impact on those left behind.

Guideline 5: How to support staff

'Missing' can occur in any socioeconomic group and any geographic region within our community, which means that families of missing people may present to a variety of agencies in their pursuit for support.

It may be useful to include these guidelines within the agency's policies and procedures so that staff are aware of the ways in which families should be treated and the referral options available to them.

Families can present with a myriad of issues that may have been triggered by the episode of missing. They may be experiencing high levels of distress and disruption in their lives. For staff this can be extremely challenging and, at times, traumatic. Staff need training and support to be able to 'sit' with families experiencing the distress that results from unresolved loss.

For clinical guidance about the experience of families of missing people and the ways in which your agency might promote connectedness, contact the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit:

Phone 1800 227 772

Referral options

If the family requires support and they live in NSW, or the person disappeared from NSW, refer the family to;

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, DAGJ

Phone 1800 227 772

Email ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

Website www.missingpersonsjustice.nsw.gov.au

If the family is in another state or territory and requires support they can contact:

National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, AFP

Phone 1800 000 634

Email missing@afp.gov.au

Website www.missingpersons.gov.au

If the family requires legal assistance relating to the missing person's estate or any socio-legal aspects related to missing contact:

Law Access

Phone 1300 888 529

Website www.lawaccess.nsw.gov.au

If the family has their own counsellor who may have a limited understanding of missing persons they can download the national counselling framework Supporting those who are left behind to assist the therapeutic process. Please go to:

Website <http://www.missingpersons.gov.au/supporting>

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

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

References

Boss P 1999. *Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

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