An Uncertain Hope:

Missing People's overview of the theory, research and learning about how it feels for families when a loved one goes missing

missing people

Foreword

This guidance provides an overview of the currently available research, policy, knowledge and understanding about what it is really like to cope when someone you love is missing. There isn't one voice or one experience but there is a shared feeling of desperation and unresolved loss, which is unique to the 'missing' issue. The guide will be used by families, practitioners and anyone supporting families and friends whilst someone is missing. We hope that by summarising the key information the guidance makes the subject easier to understand. It does contain references for those who wish to read in more depth.

missing people

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Introduction

"When someone goes missing, the effect it can have on their family or loved ones can be devastating: they can be left feeling angry, depressed, bewildered and often with a sense of bereavement. Missing People offers support, advice and practical help to those left behind at this difficult time."

Having someone missing is a harrowing experience – emotionally confusing and highly distressing. Missing People offers vital emotional support to help people devastated by a missing situation. To truly support families, we must first comprehend the overwhelming impact on a family when someone goes missing, particularly when it is for long periods of time. For simplicity, the words 'family' or 'family member' represent anyone personally affected by a missing situation.

Despite the distress felt by those left behind, it is not a crime for an adult to go missing. Missing People respects the right of an adult to go missing. However, we recognise the risk that adults, and children may face when they are missing. In the early stages of a disappearance, families understandably focus their energy on searching for their loved one – and their emotions may be ignored or pushed aside. The police - often a first port of call - will assess the risk to a missing person's safety and prioritise the search for those considered to be vulnerable. In cases where the police believe the missing person may be a victim of crime, a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) may be allocated to assist with the investigation and provide support. Otherwise, the police may provide families with a named contact, whose role is largely practical and informative. Missing People works closely with the police, complementing the services they offer. The charity recognises the strong need to support families emotionally at this stage, and throughout the period of disappearance.

The Missing People Family Feedback Survey, 2010, identified the need for better and more specific emotional support for families in the UK. Of the family members surveyed:

- 50% wanted tailored counselling
- 63% wanted guidance leaflets

The Family Feedback Survey in 2011 also highlighted the importance of counselling to the families supported by the charity; the most common new services that were spontaneously suggested were telephone and face to face counselling and family support groups.

The Missing People study *Living in Limbo* (Holmes, 2008) is based on interviews with families and explores the emotional, practical and financial impact of 'missing'. In this study, families identify their Missing People case worker as an important source of comfort – therefore, we are dedicated to strengthening the emotional support we currently provide.

The meaning of missing

Definitions and numbers

In our experience, anyone can go missing, at any time, in a wide variety of circumstances. It can be difficult to find a truly appropriate 'missing' definition. Often a person is classed as 'missing' by those left behind, potentially underestimating the complexities of a missing situation. People may have a valid reason for 'disappearing' (for example, abuse or an unhappy relationship). Also, although someone is 'missing' to one group, other people may be aware of their location (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003). Payne's definition (1995) is more two-sided, describing a person as missing from their "network of social and personal relationships", and suggests, also, that to be missing, others must be searching for them (Holmes, 2008).

Missing People refers to the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) definition: "Anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well-being or otherwise established" (ACPO, 2005). This acknowledges the range of missing circumstances and defines a person as 'missing' until their location is confirmed (Holmes, 2008).

In terms of the numbers of missing, again, it is hard to be definitive. Recent figures from the Missing Persons Bureau (NPIA, 2011) estimate:

- There were around 327,000 missing person reports 2010 – 2011 in the UK
- 51% of missing people were male and 49% were female
- 15 – 17 year olds represent over a third of all reported missing incidents

Around 75% of missing person police reports are thankfully resolved within two days – and 99% are resolved within one year (Tarling and Burrows, 2004). However, this document focuses on the 1% of people who are missing for longer – looking closely at the anguish and confusion this creates for their families.

Why do people go missing?

Missing People holds the unique position of being involved in missing from both sides. The act of going missing is frequently preceded by trauma, unhappiness, depression, financial worries, abuse, arguments or domestic violence. So, even prior to the event, the whole family may be surrounded by emotional turmoil, stress and upset. This is backed up by the Australian study, *Missing Siblings* (Clark, Warburton and Tilse, 2009), where most of the participating siblings felt their family experienced "multiple stressors" for many years, most identifying that their lost sibling was depressed before they left.

Lost from View (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003), an extensive study of Missing People files, identifies the main reasons for going missing as:

- Relationship breakdown (30 per cent of adults)
- Conflicts over independence (especially for young adults)
- Escape (usually from a crisis or stress situation)
- Mental health problems, such as depression (around 11 per cent of adults)

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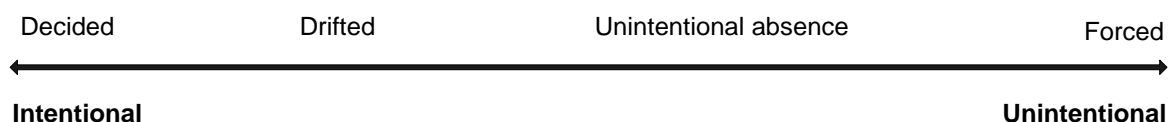people

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Other reasons include:

- Alcohol misuse
- Financial worries
- Job loss
- Undisclosed childhood abuse
- Domestic violence
- Abuse
- Drifting away (e.g.: moving house, losing contact)
- Transient lifestyles, such as moving around a lot or homelessness

Lost from View also shows:

- 19% of adults unintentionally lost contact by drifting out of touch without meaning to
- 64% left deliberately
- 16% left unintentionally (over half experienced dementia or mental health problems)
- 1% were forced to leave

To give further context, the researchers created a 'missing continuum', relating intent to external factors for going missing:

Decided	Drifted	Unintentional absence	Forced

Intentional ←————————————————————————————————→ **Unintentional**

Missing People supports those who are missing and their families across the whole continuum. We recognise the importance of perceived 'intent' to leave. Even though this intent is generally assumed rather than known by a family, it has a huge effect on their feelings and their ability to cope.

In our experience, the perceived intent also links closely to the belief that the missing person is alive or dead (Holmes, 2008). Families in *Living in Limbo* who believed their family member had left, unintentionally found it easier to understand the disappearance. Although still emotionally devastating, "the memory of the missing person's relationship with the family is protected, and the family are spared the feeling of rejection." However, this belief created fear and anxiety about their loved one's well-being and reduced the hope of their safe return (Holmes, 2008).

The disappearance was more incomprehensible for families who believed the missing person had left deliberately. Heightened feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and fear, were accompanied by being "forced to consider that their family member's life had been, in some way, unbearable". Families experienced strong feelings of rejection, as well as worry about negative reactions from other people and difficulties in explaining the disappearance. Creating a positive image and protecting the missing person's reputation was felt to be more problematic. On the other hand, the well-being of the missing person was of less concern and the hope of a safe return was higher (Holmes, 2008).

In Missing People's experience, as time passes, hope of finding someone decreases, often forcing the family to speculate about whether the missing person is alive or dead. This raises further conflict and angst for those believing the person left unintentionally, because with "the belief that a family member would never traumatise their family by going missing deliberately, the logical conclusion to draw from that is that the missing person is no longer alive" (*Living in Limbo,* Holmes, 2008).

What happens to missing people?

In *Lost from View* (Biehal et al, 2003) found that when adults go missing intentionally, return is less likely, whereas return is more likely in an unintentional missing situation. Of the missing people found alive (October 1999 to September 2000, Missing People database), 20% returned home – most were young people who had run away or those who went missing unintentionally. Around 39% of people did not return home, but resumed some contact with the people they left behind. However, 41% of adults did not resume any contact with their families. Under these circumstances, the families who are unaware their missing person has been found continued to live with the trauma of not knowing.

On the other hand, families who were aware their loved one does not wish to make contact are likely to experience further rejection, guilt, anger and other difficult feelings. Either way, these feelings can be excruciatingly debilitating and upsetting.

Anticipating potential death is understandably an area of high anxiety and distress for families. Of missing people incidents recorded by the police, around 1% are found to have died. Missing People tends to be involved in longer term cases – and 10% of these have a fatal outcome. As time passes, sadly, the risk of a missing person being found dead is higher (Newiss, 2006).

A Missing People study (Newiss, 2011) of 250 cases from 2006 to 2007 where the person died showed the following:

Of the 64 non-police cases:

- 2 died of an accident overdose (both heroin)
- 41 died of natural causes (6 of alcohol abuse)
- 3 took their own lives
- 2 were the victim of a homicide
- There was insufficient information to establish why the remaining 16 died
- Of the 186 police cases:
- 20 died of an accident (8 drowned, 7 of exposure to the elements)
- 9 died of natural causes (2 of alcohol abuse)
- 54 had taken their own life
- 14 were the victim of a homicide
- There was insufficient information to establish why the remaining 89 died

"Unending not knowing"- lack of resolution and ambiguous loss

"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', it's just a huge unanswered question, until you know you'll never, ever stop thinking about it" (*Promoting Connectedness*, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, NSW, 2010).

Perhaps the biggest emotional challenge of a missing situation for families is the lack of resolution, "the pain of not knowing and the mental torture of perhaps never knowing" (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001). Missing People hears the agony of this over and over; many family voices echoing fear, confusion and bewilderment. It may seem there are no tangible reasons for the disappearance – especially if the missing person's life seemed good or that their disappearance is out of character. In some cases, a suicide note may have been left and a family is waiting, anguished, for news the missing person has died. Agonisingly, this does not get easier for most and, for many, the pain worsens as time passes, as described in *Living in Limbo, "I think when somebody's just missing it's just hanging there. You don't really know. It's a little bit like a torture"* (Holmes, 2008).

Families feel suspended in this state of pain and uncertainty, unable to move forwards, plan or make life decisions. This state of being 'in limbo' – unable to grieve or to move on – creates a constant desire for answers about the missing person. As more time goes by, many feel any answer is preferable to not knowing at all, however, this need is contradicted by an underlying fear of finding out. Without a body, family members are unable to carry out the usual rituals, even in families where there is a strong sense the missing person is dead. Marking family events can present huge dilemmas, for instance, birthdays, anniversaries or Christmas (Holmes, 2008).

Missing Siblings expresses this as "unending not knowing" – touchingly described by one participant as, *"Not knowing is probably the worst thing. In the end, it takes control… Your control is lost"* (Clark, Warburton and Tilse, 2009).

This lack of resolution has given rise to theories on having someone missing.

Well-researched, a loss through death, is known to be a huge psychological trauma. Generally, it is agreed that people experiencing loss work through various psychological stages (Kübler-Ross 1969, Worden 1991) to reach acceptance. Occasionally, grief may be unresolved or delayed, preventing people from reaching acceptance and possibly causing mental health issues.

The tendency to see a missing situation as a type of bereavement is understandable – the families of missing people may experience many of the emotions associated with grief, however, it is far more complex. There is the pain of absence, but no evidence to suggest that the loss is ongoing or permanent.

Pauline Boss developed the concept of 'ambiguous loss' (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007), naming this as "the most distressful of all losses" (Boss, 1999). In relation to missing people she identifies that "a person is physically absent yet psychologically present" (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007). Therefore, the uncertainty and lack of information about an absent loved one is traumatic. The loss is not verified; the natural human need for meaning, sense, security, knowledge, finality and rituals are denied to the family.

There is no 'closure' or chance for resolution. People become preoccupied with thoughts about searching for the missing person. The resulting ambiguity "freezes the grief process" (Boss, 1999), often preventing one's ability to effectively process the situation emotionally, cope or make decisions. "Without information to clarify their loss, family members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence" (Boss, 2006).

There is ambiguity in terms of social status, where the missing person fits in, both now and in the future. Family members may create their own version of the 'truth' about the absent person – or may disagree about this. Friends and neighbours may not understand or know what to say – all areas of life are affected. Some people may reach a level of acceptance; however, the lack of certainty decreases the opportunities for recovery, acceptance and coping. In the *Missing Siblings* study, Clark, Warburton and Tilse (2008) support this, adding that, "Some participants suggested it took considerable time to recognise what was lost and to make sense of the implications of what had happened." Some family members have described their ambiguous loss as "leaving without goodbye" (Boss, 2007).

Although ambiguous loss cannot be 'resolved', Boss (2006), talks of a 'natural resiliency' amongst some people who are able to adapt their experience of the loss to develop an ability to live with the unanswered questions. 'Ambiguous loss' underpins many of the current studies, therapeutic models and practices to support families with a missing person.

"The most distressful of all losses"- exploring the emotional turbulence

"…there is that dreadful feeling of simply not knowing. Every face on the underground or in the supermarket is scanned. Every lead is followed. It can be a lonely and demanding road and it is not difficult for individuals to be overwhelmed with a sense of deep and hopeless sadness." (Terry Waite, CBE, Introduction to *Living in Limbo*, 2008).

Sources of information

Through the services we offer, our annual Family Feedback Surveys and our extensive contact with families, Missing People's has considerable experience with the emotional turbulence felt by the families of a missing person. *Living in Limbo* (Holmes, 2008) was written based on extensive interviews with 22 members of 20 families of currently missing people to explore their experiences. This adds depth to Missing People's understanding of the intense emotions related to having someone missing. In addition to *Living in Limbo*, the following studies and papers have also been drawn on to help create a detailed picture:

- *Understanding 'Going Missing'* (Payne, 1995) examines helpline calls to Missing People.

- The Australian best practice report *It's the Hope that Hurts* (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001) identifies that the families of missing people experience a constantly unpredictable emotional world, especially in a long-term missing situation.

- Another Australian guidance paper *Promoting Connectedness: Guidelines for Working with the Families of Missing People* (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010) notes, "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."

- The Australian study *Missing Siblings* (Clark, Warburton, and Tilse 2009) interviewed nine siblings of a long-term missing person (between 1 and 5.5 years).

It is important to stress that there are no rules about how people 'should' feel – each person's emotional experience will be different. People may feel some, all or none of the emotions described. The categories below aim to offer structure and clarity, yet, are not mutually exclusive; there is much overlap.

Feelings in the earlier and the later stages

"Families of missing persons respond in similar ways to those exposed to a sudden trauma: shock, distress, confusion, ambivalence and a considerable sense of being overwhelmed" (Wayland, 2007).

When Missing People communicates with families in the early days, the main focus is on finding the person – families may not be able to recognise their emotional needs at this stage, despite strong feelings of worry, fear, upset, desperation and lack of control.

Payne (1995) also talks about the distress, confusion, guilt, anger and anxiety of the early days. As times goes on, this develops into an interrupted grief process, with fluctuating emotions, frustration, lack of understanding and fear.

Shock is a common feeling. *Missing Siblings* described the early stage feelings as "unreality, confusion and shock... all felt they were entirely unprepared for what they experienced." When talking about her feelings at this stage, one participant said she *"didn't even know what was reality and what really wasn't"*. Another sibling said they were, *"frozen in state of high emotion"*. People talk about being overwhelmed by their emotions for a long period of time, trapped by feelings of anger, anxiety and expectation (Clark et al, 2009).

It's the Hope that Hurts relates this to the stages of grief reactions – shock, distress and denial in the early days, followed by a more acute emotional pain, where people become 'stuck' as "there is no certainty or finality and transition becomes the sufferers' prison" (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001).

"It got to the point; I couldn't take it all... It got to the point where I thought I wanted to go missing too" (Clark et al, 2009).

Unhappiness, anxiety and despair

Strong feelings of deep unhappiness, overwhelming anxiety, anguish, distress and despair feature all too frequently when describing the feeling of having someone missing. The families in *Living in Limbo* reported overwhelming feelings of sadness and intense emotional pain, *"I had never in my life, and still haven't experienced such excruciating pain"* (Holmes, 2008). *Missing Siblings* participants expressed "intense sadness, guilt, anger, confusion and frustration, disbelief and anxiety" (Clark et al, 2009).

The impact of this distress and anxiety is vast. People are unable to take any pleasure in previously enjoyable events and activities, feeling cut off from their life. Family members may experience constant thoughts about the missing person, imagining terrible fates and a pervading feeling of doom (NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010).

Guilt and Self-Blame

"Emotionally people reported shame, embarrassment, shock, sadness and helplessness at the disappearance of a family member or friend" (Henderson and Henderson 1997).

In addition to the above, people face complex feelings of guilt and self-blame. *Living in Limbo* identified four key areas of guilt: 1) not having prevented the disappearance, 2) for having possibly caused the disappearance, 3) not discovering the disappearance quickly enough, 4) not doing more to find the missing person. One participant said, *"you do look back and you think 'I should've done this and I should've done that' but it's not very helpful."* (Holmes, 2008)

Anger and frustration

Families and loved ones go through stages of strong anger and frustration – with the missing person, with themselves, with other family members or those outside the family unit. People become exasperated with the search and, in particular, the police or other organisations for not finding the person. *Living in Limbo* points out that although anger was often felt to be less acceptable by families, it was common. One participant said: *"I was furious. I just wanted to bloody kill him, you know, for putting us through this"* (Holmes, 2008). In the *Missing Siblings* study, one sibling commented, *"… sometimes I'd just get really angry, and I wouldn't know who to direct my anger at"* (Clark et al, 2009).

Mixed feelings and mood swings

These strong emotions are often mixed– families of missing people report yo-yoing emotions, creating an erratic, draining and contradictory personal emotional world. *Living in Limbo* portrays the difficulties in reconciling these constantly changing and mixed feelings as "a rollercoaster", aptly portrayed in this quote, *"You don't know whether to grieve, or to be angry with them or whether to be desperately worried, and you're a combination of all of those things at all times"* (Holmes, 2008).

Hope

 Hope is identified as a vital emotion, "profoundly important in stories of missingness" (Clark et al, 2009). In *Living in Limbo*, the brother of a missing man said, *"You feel hopeful, but you feel devastated"* (Holmes, 2008). *Missing Siblings* explains that hope can help to cope with emotions that are too overwhelming; as one sibling said, *"Maybe that's just hope, hope for the fact that you can actually live your life again and not live in a constant… void, I guess"* (Clark et al, 2009). However, again, this can create internal conflict and confusion.

Promoting Connectedness notes that families are reluctant to discuss what may have happened to someone, for fear this may be perceived as giving up hope. Hope is also depicted as a changing concept, *"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"* (NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010).

Fear

Naturally, faced with so many unanswered questions, families feel a powerful sense of fear for the missing person. This is highly intensified if a child is missing or someone is vulnerable in some way. In *It's the Hope that Hurts*, parents who have a child that has gone missing are described as being "consumed with fear" (Gosch and Tamarkin 1988). In *Missing Siblings*, one participant expressed the general views of the others by saying she was *"suspended in this state of anxiety and anticipation"* (Clark et al, 2009).

Low self-esteem and confused self-perception

A missing situation may also radically undermine confidence and affect self-image of those looking for them. People may feel less able to achieve the things they found easy previously, or doubt their skills and abilities. Parents of missing children may feel like they have failed (Hunter Institute of mental Health, 2001). *Living in Limbo* notes the effects diminished self-esteem in relation to work, with one family member saying *"You just self-doubt yourself so much, constantly. It's a battle"* (Holmes, 2008). *Missing Siblings* describes participants as losing "their former construction of identity. Some felt less competent…" (Clark et al, 2009). Promoting Connectedness describes how having someone missing, "may narrow a family's identity to viewing themselves only as a family member of a missing person" (NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010).

Reduced sense of stability in the world

As human beings, we gain emotional security from our expectations being met and the stability of our world. Having someone go missing can leave family members radically questioning the world and the way they perceive it – the world may feel unstable and unpredictable; no longer a secure place. People may alter their personal beliefs and attitudes, or feel uncertain or more vulnerable. Related to a sense of self-esteem, *It's the Hope that Hurts* puts this in a nutshell by stating that having someone missing , "poses threats not only to the present identity of the person, but their sense of future and their place within it." (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001). People may feel heighten state of fear and change their beliefs on the basis that "the world is no longer a safe place" (NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010).

A sense of powerlessness

"Emotional reactions were heightened and difficult to negotiate… and contributed to a sense of loss of control and powerlessness" (Clark et al, 2009) The extremes of emotion, interminable waiting and endless anticipation of news often leaves people feeling intensely powerless – unable to change or influence the situation, regardless of how hard they try. Additionally, in *Living in Limbo* and *Missing Siblings* families express concern about the level of police response, yet this is complicated by feeling unable to address this with the police: "Concern about alienating the police seems to contribute to feelings of powerlessness, frustration and loss of control" (Clark et al, 2009).

All the emotions described above may be further heightened or influenced by the complex behaviours and issues surrounding a missing situation, as follows:

Searching

"Searching and hoping to find their siblings, as well as seeking to make sense of what had happened and to reconcile how it happened, is central to the experience of missingness" (Clark et al, 2009).

Understandably, there is a strong desire to search for the missing person, especially in the early days of a disappearance.

Living in Limbo highlights the importance of taking action, both practically and emotionally: "Active searching provides not only a distraction from dwelling on imagined scenarios of what happened, but also helps families to feel that they are fulfilling their duty of care to their loved one by pursuing every possible avenue of enquiry."

Families found it hard to deal with many of the negative emotions - guilt in particular - and searching was felt to be useful and reassuring soon after the disappearance (Holmes, 2008). Conversely, if the search is unsuccessful as time goes by, this could contribute to heightened feelings of anxiety, despair, fear and frustration and even provoke an obsessive activity. Also, family members can have different beliefs about what happened and the best way to search, creating real conflict and feelings of frustration.

Speculating and Questioning

Having someone missing creates a state of constant speculation for families; "an untold number of other unanswerable questions, conflicts and complications" (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001). Closely linked to the need to search, people constantly self-question and speculate about the 'what ifs'. As *Missing Siblings* points out, not only can this be endless, drawn-out and debilitating, it also brings contradiction and bewilderment for people. "It was important in that it allowed new possibilities to be generated and then investigated, but it provoked great uncertainty… made coherent sense-making difficult." One sibling describes *"moving from one belief to another… an intense and disorienting feeling"* (Clark et al, 2009).

Physical Effects

It is well-recognised that emotional turmoil impacts on physical health and vice versa. The pain of having someone missing may manifest itself physically; in turn, poor health may amplify negative feelings. *Living in Limbo* highlights issues such as sleep disruption or insomnia, high blood pressure and worsening ill health, especially amongst those already vulnerable to this (Holmes, 2008). *It's the Hope that Hurts* talks of the interference with daily routines "irregular meals, late nights, disturbed sleep" and notes a reduction in the effectiveness of one's immune system (Hunter institute of Mental Health, 2001). Other health issues highlighted are digestive problems, nausea, chest pains, increased heartbeat, aching limbs, combined with "an inability to manage the day-to-day activities previously managed prior to the disappearance" (NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010).

Relationships

"Volatile tensions […] can emerge within the relationships of those struggling to deal with the anguish of not knowing" (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001).

Understandably, the stress and trauma of having someone missing may affect the stability and cohesiveness of family relationships. Constant adapting and making sense of the situation, as well as trying to work cohesively together to cope and search can create immense pressure. Family members may respond emotionally in different ways, causing conflict and misunderstanding; people may disagree about what happened, how to search, if the person is alive. Families may not communicate well under stress, or family members may find it hard to share difficult feelings, *"it's not something we do as a family. We don't talk about things like that"* (Holmes, 2008).

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Relationships may change; some couples experience increased tensions within their marriage (huinter Institute of Mental health, 2001). Status within the family can change – for example, in *Missing Siblings,* those who lost their only sibling were unsure of their status as a sibling or an only child. Siblings also reported more caution about their relationships with others and the need to keep some emotional distance, including with friends, partners and children (Clark et al, 2009). Parents may become overprotective of remaining children (Hunter Institute of mental Health, 2001).

The loss of a spouse may create "greater loneliness and anxiety about the future" (Hunter Institute of mental health, 2001). At Missing People, we have noticed the impact of relationship quality. A poor relationship with the missing person can exacerbate feelings of guilt, self-blame and constant questioning, especially if there have been recent arguments and discord. On the other hand, loss of a good relationship is likely to enhance feelings of sadness, fear and anxiety.

People may also feel affected by a 'hierarchy of grieving'; several of the participants in *Missing Siblings* felt their loss was secondary to that of their parents and focussed on others' grief (Clark et al, 2009)

Both *Living in Limbo* and *Missing Siblings*, however, also highlighted some positive changes in family relationships, including increased closeness, improved communication and a greater appreciation of each other as outcomes.[2] As one person put it, *"I think we're all closer because we've been through this but in other respects we're further apart"* (Clark et al, 2009).

Societal Reactions and Status

"The expected, feared or actual reaction that is received can have a profound impact on the families of missing people" (Holmes, 2008)

Telling people is an important step. The reactions of friends, work colleagues and others are important and affect family members' emotional well-being, in both positive and negative ways. Frequently, other people do not know how to react – shock is a common response. *Living in Limbo* describes the range of reactions, "supportive help with searching or encouragement to stay positive, nosiness and curious conjecture, and negative hopelessness and advice to be realistic." Help and supportive comments were appreciated by families, even if people were unsure what to say. Families found other reactions hard, inadvertent hurtful or blaming comments, or, people pressuring them to accept the disappearance, *"… then you've got others who would turn round and say 'look, you've got to accept it, she's obviously dead, you know, she wouldn't have done this to you' and all that."* Some *Living in Limbo* participants did not tell people, especially if the person was believed to have gone missing deliberately. There was also often a desire to maintain the missing person's reputation (Holmes, 2008).

In society the loss is often "unacknowledged, socially negated, invalidated or unrecognized" (Dempsey & Baago 1998, Doka 1989); as a result, families may feel pitied, stigmatised or unsure about their place in society, or even blamed. Support may dwindle, or people feel unable to help or urge acceptance. A caller to Missing People eloquently used the words *"sympathy fatigue"* in relation to some of the people around her. People may even be viewed as obsessive or excessively emotional about the situation (Hunter Institute of Mental health, 2001). *Promoting Connectedness* expresses this experience for families as "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." (NSW Department of justice and Attorney General, 2010).

Media and the police

"Well the police branded him a loner as well didn't they? In the papers in the [local news] saying that he's a loner, more or less, branded him as kind of an oddball" (Holmes, 2008).

Media attention can be a mixed blessing, providing valuable publicity to help the search, yet, may bring over-dramatisation, prejudice, speculation and blaming behaviour. Families may endure the tension of trying to sustain a positive image for the family or the missing person. Being interviewed can be stressful and embarrassing, opening a loved one's personal life to the public, upsetting and exposing.

In contacting the police, a family takes the difficult emotional step of admitting the missing situation is a reality. In their desperation, however, families may not view the police response as helpful or enough. Especially when an adult is believed to have gone missing intentionally, families may not report the case, believing the police will not take the situation seriously, or that this may lead to a negative and hurtful perception of their missing loved one (Holmes, 2008).

Triggers

Generally random and unexpected, a 'trigger' is anything that reminds a family member of the missing person, often suddenly. *"…you can just be pottering along when all of a sudden you look at something or hear something and you just, you know, you become very upset"* (Holmes, 2008). This may be a celebration such as a birthday, a news story about finding a body, a call from someone, finding something significant to the missing person, anything.

Well-recognised by Missing People, triggers provoke a powerful response, often radically altering someone's mood. A leaflet issued by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit in New South Wales describes this, "Mistaking a person you see in the street, hearing a song, noticing a particular news story or even smelling a familiar scent can immobilize you and can create an emotional reaction that is difficult to stifle."

Practical issues

As *Living in Limbo* identifies in detail, all the experiences as a result of someone going missing are interconnected. Practical problems, financial issues, legal concerns, contact with services and their response, the media and so forth, can all negatively affect a family member's emotions (Holmes, 2008). This is supported in other studies, "…families and friends… suffer significant health, work, quality of life, emotional, relationship, economic, and other impacts associated with the missing person incident" (Henderson et al, 2000).

The different support needs of families of missing people were also recognised in a recent report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2011). This report acknowledged that certain practical, financial and legal measures exacerbate the emotional impact of having a family member go missing, as one mother told the inquiry:

"It is trying to ease the areas that can be eased; because the area that is not going to be eased is the person is missing; but there are things that can be done that will make your path a little easier whilst you are dealing with that".

In response to the APPG report, the Government published a national cross-governmental strategy on missing children and adults (Home Office, 2011), noting that:

"The effect of a loved one going missing cannot be underestimated. The real damage done to emotional and physical health caused by the worry of not knowing where a missing relative is and whether they are safe and well is huge"

As a consequence the Government undertook to address some of the unnecessary practical differences families face when a loved one goes missing and committed to:

"ensuring that there are appropriate systems in place for families to deal with legal and financial problems, together with accessible practical guidance on how they should be used."

How do people cope?

"Coping with a family member being missing is extremely challenging. Families living 'in limbo' find it hard to use the same coping strategies they would ordinarily rely on in a painful situation" (Holmes, 2008).

Learning to cope with ambiguous loss is likely to take a considerable amount of time and require specialist support. A missing situation may challenge religious views, as well as fundamental beliefs and attitudes.

Although each person will cope in their own way (Boss 2002), when working with families who lost someone as a result of 9/11, those who managed better are:

- from a culture less focused on control and finding answers
- very religious or spiritual and therefore do not feel so helpless or confused
- able to hold two opposing ideas in their mind at the same time

The families in *Living in Limbo* (Holmes, 2008) identified many coping strategies, including: focusing on the practical, normalising or rationalising the experience, cutting off or compartmentalising feelings and seeking support such as counselling or medication. Talking to people, in order to share feelings, discuss the situation and reminisce, was felt to be extremely helpful by most.

At the same time, *Living in Limbo* (Holmes, 2008) also identified that some people may not recognise or understand their feelings, or may not feel entitled to them, needing encouragement and time to comprehend them. Some people, understandably, may also turn to more unhelpful coping activities like drugs or drink.

Several studies and reports advocate the need for counselling specific to missing in order to understand the complex needs of families. These also suggest crisis counselling in the early days, followed by more in-depth counselling later (Hunter Institute of Mental Health New South Wales, 2001, Wayland, 2007).

An extensive counselling framework, based on the ambiguous loss work (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007) has been developed by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre in New South Wales, Australia. The stages of this are described in detail in *Supporting Those Who Are Left behind: a Counselling Framework for the Families of Missing People* (Wayland, 2007).

When Missing People consulted families to inform the development of our own counselling pilot, we found that although families recognised the importance of counselling, they also reinforced the need to have an opportunity to talk to people who have been through the same experience:

'No matter how much empathy someone has, unless they've been through it they can never truly comprehend'.

It is vital for anyone working with the families of missing people to be self-aware and explore their own feelings about the challenges and ambiguities of the state of missing. Boss eloquently expresses this, "To work with families of missing persons, we must first understand our own fear of that phenomenon and of having no answers" (Boss et al 2003)

Although the difficulties are immense, many believe there is hope for people in coping. Pauline Boss says she is "optimistic; people can and do live well with ambiguous loss" (Boss, 2006)

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