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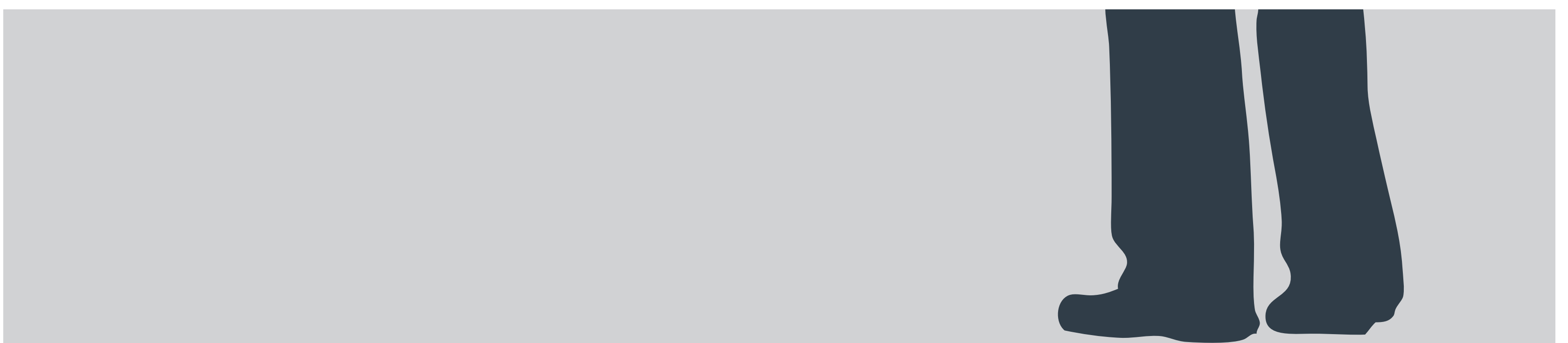
MISSING PERSONS

ACKNOWLEDGING THE EMPTY SPACE

A FRAMEWORK TO ENHANCE SUPPORT OF PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND WHEN SOMEONE IS MISSING



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PREFACE

As I neared the end of my PhD study, exploring the role of hope for families left behind when someone is missing, a participant in my research asked me, 'Just how much can we bear?' The loss of her son in 2005 had shaped the way she lived her life and how she learnt to manage the imagined and real trauma of where he was, what he was doing and the multitude of possibilities about how vulnerable he could still be while missing. It is this ambiguity for family and friends that is unique to missing persons.

Prior to working in the missing person's space, I had been a social worker for six years in the domestic violence and child protection fields from the late-1990s. I had accepted a temporary position, after the NSW State Government funded a counselling position within the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), in the (then) NSW Department of Attorney General. I had been working alongside families of the missing, honing my skills in trauma counselling and acknowledging my own thoughts on how ambiguous loss could be explored in the therapeutic space. I realised that there was little opportunity in Australia to extend my knowledge of support as I had neared the limit as to what I could learn from liaising with police, negotiating with the media and breaking the sadness of news to people who had been waiting such a long time in hope that their missing person would come home.

In 2005 I was awarded a Churchill Fellowship, and with this I travelled to the US, UK and Europe, visiting with Emeritus Professor Pauline Boss, sitting in the offices of Missing People UK, attending support groups in Montreal, Canada, and sharing a meal with families in Ireland who had set up their own support service for other families of the missing. From that trip, *Supporting those who are left behind: A counselling framework for health professionals responding to the needs of missing people* was published (2007). My goal, at the time, was to provide an introductory resource that enabled health professionals to begin to understand what might face them in the counselling room, and to try to undo some of the unintentional grief families told me they experienced when they had to upskill the very person they had turned to for support.

What I hadn't shared with many of the families I worked with over those years was the fact that I had also lived through my own experience of having a missing person. While preparing for my Churchill Fellowship, a close family member vanished under traumatic circumstances. He was located 48 hours later, but the return of him to our lives changed our relationship forever. The trauma of worrying that he would go again, the shame of not being able to keep him close, and the uncertainty that came from this being a *new normal* in our lives shaped my capacity to understand the experiences of my clients in a way that I have always struggled to articulate. I still live with those scars today.

In the 11 years since that first booklet was written, it has gone on to be cited in all of the significant academic publications written internationally. I didn't write the document as an academic researcher, I wrote it as a practising clinical social worker who saw a gap and wanted to make things easier. However, it was these experiences that led me into research, knowing that there was a dire need for an evidence base with which to work with individuals and families during a period of missing.

I started postgraduate research in 2012 to explore the constant inclusion of hope in the narratives of the families of missing people who came to me for therapy. Five years later, I had a body of work on *hope*, yet I was only marginally closer to what might be the key inclusion in the toolbox of professionals, the police, the media and the community when hearing of a missing person – whether they came home or not. In this booklet I take my initial thoughts a few steps further. I draw on other books published over the last decade as well as research studies written in the middle years – between the first writing of the booklet and now.

The missing persons sector in Australia is a very young sector. For those reading this booklet I implore you to be flexible and open to challenging what it means to live without knowing, and to push yourself in clinical supervision (if you are a counsellor), in workplace debriefing (if you are the police), and in moments of reflection (if you are the families and friends helping, or if you have your own lived experience that you offer as expertise).This is intended to be a handy guide, with the hope that it challenges people to reflect on the way they embrace ambiguity and the detrimental impacts that occur when we don't practise what tolerating the unknown means both professionally and personally.

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOKLET

In the preparation phase for the writing this booklet, the research team (from the University of New England), including myself, Dr Sarah Wayland, and Professor Myfanwy Maple, developed a mixed methods research design. This means combining quantitative data – through an online survey – with qualitative analysis of key informant interviews, as well as a scoping review of all available literature. The study sought to explore:

- *What might be the best practice guidelines for providing crisis and ongoing counselling to families of missing people?*
- *What advancements have there been in the counselling field that may be relevant to families and friends of missing people in Australia?*
- *How can information regarding supportive interventions be conveyed appropriately to health professionals seeking to support this population group?*

The gathering of data from individuals with lived experience had approval from the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee (HE18-029). The scoping review of the literature followed the framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005) in identifying therapeutic interventions, reflections on counselling and additional scope for the role of other professionals and the community in responding to families of missing people. The link for the survey was shared, with gratitude, by the FFMPU, via State and Territory police jurisdictions, via the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), via charities such as the Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN), and other social media pages who respond to the needs of families of missing people.

As lead researcher, I also interviewed professionals working in the research or service delivery space, identifying therapeutic trends for those who required counselling support while the person was missing via key informant interviews. These interviews included the FFMPU and Ms Cecilia Hammell from the University of Wollongong, a PhD candidate currently exploring people's ability to tolerate uncertainty and the coping strategies they use to manage the emotions they are experiencing. I also had discussions with Dr Lonneke Lenferink, currently with Utrecht University. Lonneke's recent study examined mechanisms and treatment of psychopathology in people exposed to a potential traumatic loss. The final draft was reviewed by Professor Myfanwy Maple, and a sensitivity reader with lived experience was employed to ensure the booklet accurately identified the lived experience of those living in the space of ambiguity.

Section One provides an introduction to what typically occurs when someone is missing. I discuss how we define a missing person, how often it occurs – by relying on newly released data from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) (2017) – and I also begin to weave together what happens when we don't have answers, especially in a solution-focused society intent on solving mysteries.

Section Two reviews the current empirical research and grey literature available – the technical reports, information guides and support documents available to families of missing people.

Section Three explores the role of 'others' – the people who sit outside of the lived experience of having someone missing, such as the counsellors, police, other families and friends, and the media – and proposes ways in which they can be mindful about how to interact with families and friends of missing people. This section is highlighted for professionals and key collaborators of support to help them in the journey of support provision.

In conclusion, and throughout the pondering of the question presented earlier, this framework reflects on the fact that there is no answer to how much a person can bear, but I am reassured that supportive interventions and social connectedness can ease the burden of *not knowing*.

UNDERSTANDING AMBIGUITY IN A CONTEXT OF MISSING PEOPLE

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The Australian Institute of Criminology (2017) recently updated Australian data relating to how many people go missing in addition to the known risk factors related to disappearances. The report identified that in the period 2005–2012, more than **38,000** reports were received by police annually regarding a person who was missing. This translates to more than 100 reports a day.

Australian police jurisdictions define a missing person as *someone whose whereabouts are unknown and that there are concerns for their safety and wellbeing*. The majority of people who disappear are aged between 13 and 17 years. From a vulnerability perspective, the report states that those most likely to go missing are 'persons with a mental illness (e.g. anxiety and depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or other psychotic illness), persons expressing suicidal ideation, and those with dementia, an intellectual or physical disability or without lifesaving medication. Additional groups that may be at an elevated risk of harm include persons known or thought to have been last located in potentially life-threatening environmental conditions (e.g. lost at sea)' (p. 18). Almost all reports (98%) were successfully resolved. Missing people are primarily located alive (Bricknell and Renshaw, 2016).

From a therapeutic and support perspective, it is important to not translate these statistics in a way that minimises the challenges for people who are left behind, even if a person is only missing for a short while. The return rate of missing people is promising; however, the underlying risk factors relating to why people vanish – crime, trauma, lifespan issues, cognitive decline, mental health concerns or other health-related conditions – means that the capacity for both the missing person to be vulnerable whilst absent and the family to experience trauma during the missing episode and on return cannot be understated.

In terms of what we do know about a person being missing, and the experience of the left behind, much of the material available for Australian families is championed by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), funded by the Department of Justice, NSW. The service provides counselling support – individual and group work and an online capacity to families where the person was last seen in NSW or where the family/friends reside in NSW. In addition, the service generates significant grey literature, such as information booklets, pamphlets, media engagement and community initiatives. Two of the three staff are also currently undertaking postgraduate research studies in the area of support for families of missing people.

From previous research, we know that a significant proportion of people who are in some way connected to a person who goes missing will be impacted by that loss. The loss itself is referred to as *ambiguous* – defined by Boss (1999) as 'unending, not knowing' – given the uncertainty as to when the loss will end. The connection between uncertainty and ongoing stress and/or anxiety is an important first step to remember. The sense of having to accept that information about the person, and how to bring them home, is unclear and is a cruel loss to witness.

What I have noticed over the years is that despite the reasons as to why people vanish, or the circumstances surrounding their loss being different, there are some similarities in the ways people present when a traumatic loss occurs. People often go back to their last interaction with the person, pointing out the moment where they no longer live in the *before* – a space where the missing person's whereabouts are known, or a sense of life being the same – with a sad resignation or jarring reminder that they now populate the *after*. The after is a space where people's worldviews can shift, where they have less certainty about where a loved one is. Suddenly, nothing is the same; a loss of trust in the predictability of the world enters one's reality.

In my early days of working with families of missing people, I was always struck by the recollections of the day the missing person was last seen. All those small moments of normal life are magnified, as if a fine-tooth comb is raked over the experience. People constantly scan these interactions looking for clues and direction. Families recall, with great detail, what was eaten, who was seen and often a gut feeling or a sense of impending doom that perhaps this loss might stay forever.

Whilst the statistics reinforce the fact that of those who do vanish, many return, a small percentage remain missing longer term (that is, more than three months). The evidence presented within this booklet, and the strategies suggested for supportive engagements, relate to both short-, medium- and long-term missing episodes. This is important given the immediate trauma when a person's whereabouts are unknown, right through to long-term missing. Thus, a person-centred approach is necessary; being one that seeks input from the person who is asking for support to allow them space to identify, if they can, how the loss is impacting them. This should be at the core of every engagement.

The first role of a supportive responder is not to categorise families left behind as having similar reactions to other people who have a loved one missing. ***What works for one family may not work for another.*** Irrespective of the type of professional or personal relationship we have to the family, factors such as time since missing, circumstances surrounding why the person is missing, previous histories of trauma, engagement with services and the internal capacity for a person to learn to live alongside ambiguity, will mean that everyone has a different reaction to loss. There is no 'one size fits all' model, BUT we do know that some strategies are far more effective than others. Thus, beginning with a person-centred approach allows individuality to explore what is needed by THIS person, and THIS family. These strategies are outlined in Section Two. Appendix A outlines what families are currently telling us about accessing support when someone is missing in Australia from the survey we circulated, thus building evidence in the field.

It is important to note that, at the time of writing the initial framework (2007), the FFMPU was the only service of its kind funded to respond to the needs of people left behind. This is still the case. The Missing Persons Advocacy Network, a charity established by a family member of a missing person, also provides timely support to families in the pursuit of searching.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF HAVING SOMEONE MISSING?

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For the purposes of this project, academic literature was reviewed alongside unpublished PhD theses and grey literature from the FFMPU. What is important to emphasise, as noted by Rosenblatt (2017), in identifying how health care workers respond to families of missing people, is that **when a person vanishes, the family must acquire knowledge about 'one thousand things they should never have to learn'**. This sudden immersion of newly acquired knowledge can be about how policing works, understanding court (including coronial matters) processes and the bureaucratic procedures they may have had the luxury of previously being ignorant about. In short, their worldview shifts.

In my own study (Wayland, 2015) on the role of hope, one family mentioned that their 'rose-coloured glasses' had been torn off after their sister vanished, and that the way they saw the world was forever impacted by that day. This significant change to a person's life, and to their worldview, must underpin any supportive response when supporting someone, be it counsellors, police, other community members or the media. In understanding how support should be offered, we are not only emphasising **support for emotional and social wellbeing, but support in navigating investigations, the media, and ways to connect with other families of missing people, as they become accustomed to this new 'normal'**.

It is from these higher-level concepts, about a shift in acceptance of the way the world 'worked' prior to the loss of the person, that we begin to pull down the threads that describe how families of missing people might behave in the crisis and intervening times, while waiting for news about the missing person. The remainder of this booklet presents themes and strategies, identified in the literature as being helpful, supported by these research findings. They have been divided into key sections that can be accessed depending on who the reader is.

Boss (2010) tells us that to live with the ambiguous loss of a missing person, the family 'grief is frozen, life is out on hold, and people are traumatised' (p. 137). However, it is important when reading about support strategies that we do not inadvertently send a message to families of missing people that it is ***not*** possible to live a meaningful life whilst they wait for news about a missing person. In my own professional experience of supporting families, many do learn to live with not knowing – **it's not nice, it's not easy, but it is possible.**

SO WHAT IS AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

> *It never ends. It's ambiguous loss in most cases. Even a coroner's court ruling doesn't provide closure. It was like a bomb going off in our lives. It's isolating and destructive. I wouldn't wish it upon anyone. It really never ends. (Friend of a missing person who vanished between one and three years ago and who hasn't yet been found.)*

Emeritus Professor Pauline Boss developed the concept of 'ambiguous loss' in the 1970s in response to her work with families post-war and in family migration. She identified that when a missing person is physically absent, there is 'uncertainty as to whether the loss will be final' (p. 6). In Glassock's work (2011) on the Australian experience of ambiguous loss, he identified that the disappearance of a person leaves a mark on the psychological wellbeing of people left behind. There are shattered assumptions about how the world 'should work', and that the family is forever changed by the absence. Glassock found that the type of loss was unique and not well managed by grief counsellors, and that a new model of intervention was required that allowed people to explore their loss without being forced to accept that the loss was forever.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND TRADITIONAL IDEAS OF GRIEF?

> *The counsellor had no grasp on the type of grief I was experiencing, and simply concluded the session with 'it sounds like you're grieving'. (Sibling of a missing person, missing for between four and ten years.)*

Wayland, Maple, McKay and Glassock (2016), in a review of the literature exploring the differences between bereavement and ambiguous loss, noted that when a person is missing, hope and ambiguity are closely aligned. Within this hope is a sense of potential for return of the life a person once had, and that families have ideas of a final resolution, or for life to return to how it was pre-loss. Likewise, Betz and colleagues (2006) 'note that the families' capacity to "move on" is not a sign of immobility or inability to deal effectively with a situation, but the powerlessness exacerbated by the uncertainty' (p. 24). When we respond to a grief that is certain – like a death where the body is present – we can begin to understand what it means to 'move on'. When it comes to living with the loss of a missing person we, as support people, need to assist people to **tolerate the unknown**.

Hammell, during key informant interviews, also found that the use of a traditional grief model in offering support is not helpful. This was also echoed in conversations with FFMPU. Hammell also notes, in her currently unpublished research, that families have shared a sense of feeling invalidated because of the lack of awareness of counsellors in trying to respond to the *neat grief work* models, which suggest that the goal is acceptance of the loss, or for their grief reactions to be less acute. In the vulnerable moment of stepping out and requesting help, that being told what they feel is grief – or the counsellor admitting trepidation in responding to the type of loss they experience – limits the family's possibility of engaging with the therapy service.

HOW DO FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PEOPLE TYPICALLY REACT?

In order to understand how to support missing people, it is important to accept that there is no 'one way' to respond to having someone missing. One family member, the parent of an adult child who went missing between one and three years ago, and who has not yet been located, explained: 'The main thing is the way different people react. Our family is reeling from the occurrences, and some relationships within family will never be the same due to reactions. Everyone knows that some people need help but there is often nowhere for them to turn.' What is important, however, is to accept that some will have similar reactions. The evidence base tells us that living with ambiguous loss for extended periods of time may heighten the risk for developing prolonged grief, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Lenferink, 2018).

Families may experience:

- stress or anxiety about the whereabouts of the person, the reaction to waiting and the loss of control of a situation
- being traumatised by the nature of the disappearance, as well as the imaginings as to what might be occurring for the person whilst their whereabouts are unknown
- intense sadness that no matter how hard they search they cannot locate the person
- disconnection from the community around them in terms of people going about their lives, unaffected by the loss that they, the left behind, are consumed by
- confusion about the practical processes involved in searching or administering the affairs of the missing person
- avoidance: Hammell notes that coping can sometimes be managed by a sense of cognitive avoidance – sometimes by avoiding the circumstance entirely (such as the significant findings of the investigation, the potential for sightings) or suggesting the person might come back when all available evidence says otherwise.

WHY DO WE NEED TO SET ASIDE CERTAIN WORDS OR CONCEPTS WHEN OFFERING SUPPORT?

Betz and colleagues (2006) noted that families may hesitate to share their grief because of shame, because they fear judgement, or believing they should be able to 'get over' their loss. People who offer support often have an internal plan about how they might help. This internal plan needs to be challenged and focused on what the family is asking for, or what they are saying in terms of their reactions to loss. Specific therapeutic strategies are located within Section 3 (a).

Setting aside assumptions is a significant skill for supporters to embrace. Hammell notes 'not just presuming that you understand "missing" is important', but also acknowledging the values that you impose relating to how close the person is to the missing person, thoughts on the circumstances surrounding the disappearance, and perceptions on time and grief are all necessary to reflect on. The following concepts can also help in preparing people when offering support.

CLOSURE

Hofmeister (2017) notes, when identifying how forensic scientists can better support families of missing people, that 'closure is a good term for real estate and business deals in which there are true absolutes and clear conclusions, but it is not a valid term for human relationships'. FFMPU support this sentiment, stating that the word *closure* can be a barrier to accessing support. If a person feels someone is going to pressure them to 'shut the door' on the person they love, or to stop searching or to accept an outcome that they are not interested in, this can limit a person's capacity to reach out for support.

Boss (2002) notes the paradox that the more pressure is imposed upon families of missing people for closure actually creates more resistance from families. They might feel pushed to set aside hopeful resolution ideas because the quest for closure is so strong by those around them. Supporters need to be patient, have respect and acknowledge the complexity of the processes that people go through while waiting for news.

ACCEPTANCE

In her study exploring the role of counselling therapeutic strategies, Hammell identified that terms with a focus on *acceptance* in the counselling space were not useful for the experience of ambiguity. For some supporters, acceptance may be referring to an acknowledgement that the person is gone, and not coming back. However, this is not synonymous with closure, where the emotional state is concluded. Lenferink (2018) notes that 'openness and understanding towards one's suffering, accepting that the disappearance is uncontrollable and receiving emotional support from others' seem helpful. This may mean that the term *acceptance* might be better used in another way – an acceptance of the current state of uncertainty needing to be embraced; and whilst that might be distressing, ***it is the distress that needs acceptance, not acceptance that a person will never return.***

THINKING THAT HOPE IS A POSITIVE RESPONSE

Thoughts on hope, as noted in Wayland (2015), change over time. It was uncovered in this research that hope isn't a natural conclusion when someone is absent, and that some find a sense of distress by being forced to hold on to hope. One participant in the 2015 study spoke about hope being pain, that the hope for the return of her son 12 years after he vanished was a teasing sensation. In addition, she struggled with the sharp pains that came with hoping for a positive outcome, but that others around her didn't want to listen to her because of our community assertion that hope is a positive emotion, that it is something to be held on to at all costs.

Hope, and exploring its meaning individually, can allow for opportunities of self-discovery in terms of opportunities for post-traumatic growth. The capacity to gradually learn new ways to live with ambiguous loss is slow. Support people can be cautious about introducing hope. Edey and Jevne (2003) identify the concerns about offering *false hope* to people. But this is an assumption based on the support person's thoughts about what might be plausible in terms of the outcome of an investigation. Families should be encouraged to identify what hope means to them, and how helpful or not helpful this would be to the person's wellbeing. For some, it's the hope that hurts, while for others, hope is the glue that holds the liminal space together.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE 'WHAT IFS'

In my own doctoral study, I explored the concept of the 'but, maybe'. In exploring concepts with the families who completed the survey, there were similar thoughts about **not being able to commit to one thought about what had happened to the missing person**, as explained by the parent of an adult child missing for more than ten years: 'The endless to and fro, the games your mind will play on you in the still of the night. What if? Eats away at you until the morning light. In death there is finality, an outcome, an end – but missing is neither here nor there.'

My experience when speaking to families of long-term missing people, irrespective of how certain they may have been that a person was not going to be located, was that there was always a point at the end of their story where they would say 'but, maybe', and then over a possible story they allowed themselves to imagine a positive outcome with the person still being alive. The inclusion of hope in providing an opportunity to assert the 'but, maybe' was the tool that assisted people in learning to live in the liminal space between presence and absence. This 'but, maybe' offered families strength and resilience to tolerate, or master, their loss. The possibility of hope (for a different outcome than the one they were currently being presented with) provided families with the capacity to rise each day. These 'what ifs' shifted each day and allowed people to step in and out of ideas of finality, meaning people can (and do) exist in the liminal space for long periods of time.

Perhaps most relevant to all health professionals, police and others is the work recently published by Lenferink (2018). She noted (with caution due to the limitations of research design) in her exploration of prolonged grief symptoms of families of missing people, that people with more self-compassion experience less psychopathology. This is enhanced by a better capacity to stop themselves engaging in what is called 'ruminative' thinking (meaning less time spent trying to work through the 'what ifs'), and that mindfulness-based interventions can assist in re-training or training families to live life post loss. Those ruminations, as noted by Wayland (2015), can sometimes be a sense of hope or reflections on the trauma, but they can also keep people frozen by forcing them to run through possibilities over and over, to the exclusion of other everyday activities.

Support people, and in particular counsellors, need to help people identify the role of these ruminations, and the eventual 'but, maybes' to help them explore mindful strategies to manage their intrusions. These are explored further in Section Three.

DO DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS RESPOND DIFFERENTLY TO LOSS?

> *The loneliness and not knowing what has happened to the missing person and the impact it has on all the families and friends of that person, not just the partner. (Partner of a missing person, gone for between four and ten years.)*

Parents – Clark's (2007) work on missing people and family relationships identified that parents of the missing person are often seen as 'primary grievers'. For some parents, identifying the sadness that may come with a sense of needing to protect their child can be one of the significant challenges of waiting for news about the missing person.

Siblings – Sibling relationships are the longest relationships of our lifetime, yet they are rarely the target for support provision. My survey identifies that the reactions of siblings are important to honour, and that sibling reactions need to be acknowledged in terms of their close age to the person lost and the closeness of the relationship to the missing person.

Children and young people – FFMPU, and the accompanying doctoral research study currently being undertaken by Davies, notes that young people – when consulted about their experience of ambiguous loss – were very clear about their wish to be informed, included and supported in relation to the investigation and their ongoing support needs.

DO PEOPLE'S SUPPORT NEEDS CHANGE OVER TIME?

In terms of reflecting on the differing reasons as to why a person goes missing, and the impact of that loss for extended periods of time, we asked people whether their support needs changed over time; **84% of respondents said that they did**.

Respondents were asked to explain their response. They noted a continuum or timeline of responses to living with their own ambiguous loss – the theme was that the loss 'shifted and moved' as time passed and that families were 'forever changed' because of their exposure to uncertainty. One respondent explained: 'At times I am strong and cope well on my own, but when I feel vulnerable – these are the times I find it tougher.' (Parent of an adult who has been missing for less than a year.) Whereas, for others, the need to talk without answers became an issue: 'After several years of talking and talking and talking... I became talked out... the situation did not change.' (Mother of a missing person.) For those who deal with multiple episodes of the same person going missing, the repetitive nature of the disappearance allows them to develop new coping mechanisms: 'Each time he goes missing it becomes more "normal". I also develop strategies for the next time based on what happened this time, which often reduces the support I need or means I know more of the type of support I need.' (Parent of a person who has gone missing between five and ten times.)

The survey revealed that the list of people who can 'offer' support can be vast; however, irrespective of who offers support – police, counsellors, workplaces – the support needs to be person-centred and flexible to people's needs changing over time.

WHAT ABOUT SUPPORT NEEDS FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE A LOVED ONE WHO IS MISSING IN THE LONGER TERM?

The primary focus of my own doctoral study (Wayland, 2015) was to explore shifting notions of hope for families of missing people whose loved one was missing for longer than twelve months. The conclusion of the study identified that there was a continuum of loss for families left behind, and that, over time, a gradual learning to shift hope for the missing person to hope for the left behind was identified. The participants of the study told me that hope became a softer, less harsh, desperate sensation, and that learning how to identify triggers and acknowledging that family members would all have different responses was important to honour. Thoughts of rituals and celebrations of the person who was lost was also identified.

Lenferink (2018), in exploring the grief reactions of families of missing people from a clinical perspective, notes that not having access to grief rituals and the accompanying 'uncertainty and disorientation' of having someone missing can provoke a stress reaction. This means that the trajectory of healing is compromised when uncertainty exists.

These multiple reactions – stress, fear, anxiety, uncertainty – all run alongside the lived experience of missing someone. A service evaluation of FFMPU in 2011 identified that the goal of providing counselling support to families of missing people in the long term needs to centre on 'the inclusion of the loss rather than the situation resolving' (FFMPU evaluation 2011). For those families where remains are located (a support intervention for resolved missing persons, which is outside the scope of this booklet) needs to have awareness that the location of remains are a physical reunification of the family, not necessarily a closing or finality of the loss. In this study, families explored the same concepts; they noted that '(This) is a long, drawn out, complex type of grief.'

From here, the booklet identifies some of the strategies that further expand on the original counselling framework, and the ways that families can continue to honour the life of the missing person.

CELEBRATIONS

In the original counselling framework (2007), the concept of a 'celebration, so far' was introduced. This allowed families of missing people, who are often excluded from community-based celebrations, to remember the person who is currently not here. The concept of 'so far' was added in order to identify to families that they did not need to suggest the loss had ended, but that it marked a place in time where thoughts of remembering the missing person could be allowed. In 'no news today', an exploration from Parr and Stevenson (2015) that reflects on witnessing and interviewing families of missing people, attention should be paid to the person by celebrating them. These celebrations might be in the form of story-telling, photography, film or events. It allows people to remember that the absent can be brought into the present.

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND RITUALS

Glassock (2006) noted that the funeral is the most common ritual attached to loss. However, in the case of missing people, a funeral is not an appropriate way to acknowledge the loss, regardless of how long they have been gone. It is important to note that there are currently no designated rituals for people to employ when a person is missing. Yet, support rituals can be developed with family members to provide remembrance spaces.

Beder (2002), in exploring the rituals surrounding death in disaster situations where people are unaccounted, offers reinforcement that an outdated model of grief requiring steps or stages is not relevant. FFMPU agrees that the counsellor can be a safe space to explore new rituals. The hanging of photographs, the placing of flowers where the person was last seen, or the erecting of small shrines to honour the loss can all be included as rituals. It is important to note that the development of these should be family led.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS

In 2004, the FFMPU funded the Robertson and Demosthenous (2004) GUMURRII Centre, Griffith University, to conduct a project exploring the representation of young Aboriginal women in NSW in missing persons statistics. Since the publishing of the report, no further work has been completed to progress the recommendations in relation to supporting families from a culturally competent perspective when missing is included.

Supporting families of missing people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander needs to be conducted through a decolonising lens. Identification of the impact of forced removal of Aboriginal people from their families, social determinants of health and access to culturally competent services need to be at the forefront of support and inform any service provision. Robertson et al. (2004) notes that there needs to be 'increased programs that engage community support for youth in schools to reinforce their cultural, social and gender identity. Further, there needs to be an increase in community education counsellors and youth support workers with expertise in dealing with problems' (p. 44). It is important to continue to both analyse and synthesise the findings of the recent AIC report (2016) in order to explore service delivery from a marginalised population group's perspective for families of long-term missing people.

Other cultural explorations of missing and rituals were developed from reflecting on the work with Thai survivors of the Boxing Day tsunami. The families left behind turned to Buddhist monks to help find 'solace in their grief' (Lindberg Falk, 2010). They shared that the recovery process was centred upon ceremonies and rituals that allowed for old and new rituals to merge in a way to honour the grief where bodies had not been located. The monks, in consultation with families, arranged 'counterfeit' funerals where families displayed pictures, burned pieces of paper with the missing person's name and used the ritual as a way to communicate openly their thoughts about the missing person who had died. Some who believed the missing person might still be found opposed the counterfeit funerals. This reinforces the importance of acknowledging the role of societal pressure, even when the family feels differently to what the community believes, and that different people will experience missing in a variety of ways.

PROVIDING SUPPORT – GUIDELINES FOR ENGAGEMENT

PROVIDING SUPPORT – GUIDELINES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Data gathered from the online survey circulated to Australian families and friends of missing people has been attached as Appendix A. This is for those wishing to seek further understanding of the complexity of experience around who is missing, what their risk factors may have been regarding their disappearance, and what the experience of support was. The findings have been combined with the review of the literature and interviews with key informants who work in the missing persons space, to present the following guidelines:

a) **Guidelines for counsellors**
b) **Guidelines for police and search agencies**
c) **Guidelines for those offering support as family and friends, or as lived experience supporters**
d) **Guidelines for the media**

The different types of supporters included in this section reflect the thoughts around the different strategies that are needed in order to provide good enough support. At the forefront are the support professionals funded to help families of missing people – counsellors, psychologists, helpline staff, police, coronial staff, grief counsellors, search teams and, inadvertently, the media (as in through the action of sharing news about a missing person you are helping the family with what their main aim usually is – to find the person). Extended family, friends, work colleagues and people themselves living with the loss of a missing person might also find these reflections useful. So what do all supporters need to remember?

BE PERSON-CENTRED

> *From a person-centred perspective, family wanted support workers to understand that every situation is unique, but there are common threads between us all. Standing together and supporting each other and seeking out support where we can is vital. I could not have gotten through the past five years without the support from staff from the NMPCC, FFMPU, Denise and Bruce Morcombe, MPAN, and other families and friends of missing people. That agencies and people with lived experience working together provided a wraparound of care. (Relative of a young person missing for more than ten years.)*

In conversation with FFMPU for this resource, the staff of the unit reinforced that support people need to be person-centred in their approach to working with individuals and groups who have someone missing. This requires anyone providing support to empathically listen to where the individual, and the family, are at, and what their needs are at that time. This is critical. FFMPU shared that 'support needs of people will differ between people in the same family', and that delivering therapeutic services is to identify and respect individual needs. (See: 'What to expect from the FFMPU counselling service' from the FFMPU website.)

CAPACITY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

Much of the literature related to missing persons and ambiguous loss refers to liminality, which simply means the space in between. In between what was before the person went missing and a new place. In the provision of support for families of missing people, this means the emotional needs of people while they wait. Clark (2006) and Glassock (2011) both speak of the importance of acknowledging the experience of fluctuating uncertainty in this space between disappearance and resolution. What might also be relevant for people offering support is to understand that hopefulness and hopelessness – the rise and fall of possibility – is tied in with the expectation of location, and the impact of a possible death. All of these thoughts can happen on a daily basis, meaning that the sense of liminality becomes the new reality.

Upcoming work by PhD Candidate Cecilia Hammell notes that the most significant tool for the support person is to name and talk about the liminal space – the space where families of missing people exist – and that this gives people the capacity to live their lives alongside what has happened.

Sections 3 (a) through to 3 (d) provide detailed information for the varying supporters assisting families and friends of missing people.

GUIDANCE FOR COUNSELLORS RESPONDING TO FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PEOPLE

GUIDANCE FOR COUNSELLORS RESPONDING TO FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PEOPLE

> *The worst part when someone is missing for a long time is the frustration and heartbreak of not knowing, and the terrible place your mind takes you as to what has happened to them. (Parent of an adult who went missing more than ten years ago.)*

The connection between experiences of loss and the assistance of counsellors is a logical relationship in terms of assisting people to navigate what has occurred. The survey data revealed that there is not just one support avenue for people needing support for their loss. In addition, the impacts of availability of specific support agencies, such as the FFMPU, impacts the ways in which professional support is delivered.

In my interviews with FFMPU when developing this booklet, some of the strategies used to assist in referral are well-developed in NSW. This includes the details of the counselling service on the back of the police information card that is handed to families, as well as the sharing of the service's phone number at the end of media stories and service documents. For families in other states and territories, the referral process is less rigorous, with state and territory police missing persons units having information to share with families, or families locating services themselves via the internet or word of mouth.

In terms of the financial costs of accessing support, 23 respondents of the survey identified that they accessed a free counselling service; four people used the *Better Access to Medicare Mental Health Scheme*; four people paid full-fee for therapy sessions; and one accessed a counsellor via a private health insurance scheme. Referrals were primarily self-referrals, with the police and the person's family or friends connecting people with counsellors in a small number of cases. **Professionals who refer families to support services should be mindful about the potential cost of a service as this can impact capacity to engage with a service provider.**

Typically, when people are asked about their experience of receiving support, articulation of what helped and what hindered their experience often falls to the deficit. Respondents of the survey noted that counsellors gave them ideas to manage their grief, whilst others said that their mental health support team ensured they did not harm themselves as a result of the ambiguous loss they were experiencing. In terms of what was viewed as unhelpful, or of no benefit to their experiences, respondents shared the following:

> *People who try to help say they 'understand'. They are never available during the late hours or early hours where grief is often the worst.* (Parent of a person who went missing more than ten years ago, at the age of 24.)
>
> (I was told) *to try to put aside guilt that I felt.* (Sibling of an adult who went missing less than a year ago.)
>
> *He* (the counsellor) *did not have experience in missing person cases.* (Parent of an 18-year-old daughter who went missing more than ten years ago.)
>
> *There was nothing available for our situation. We did not fit in any of the boxes.* (Parent of a 17 year old who went missing more than ten years ago.)
>
> *The counselling was useful but extremely expensive, even with a mental health plan in place.* (Sibling of a 20 year old who went missing more than ten years ago.)
>
> *Go for a walk was the best advice they could give me. No real solutions or information about my missing son.* (Parent of a 19 year old who went missing between one and three years ago.)

HOW DO PEOPLE DESCRIBE THE AMBIGUOUS LOSS OF A MISSING PERSON?

Respondents were asked, via short-answer response, what they would like support workers or counsellors to understand about what it means to live with the loss of a missing person. The responses were analysed and related to one of two types of response:

TRAUMA RESPONSES
An all-consuming cumulonimbus of pain, disruption, confusion, doubt and worry. And the fear that it will hover over you and your family for the rest of your lives. (Sibling of a missing person who vanished more than four years ago.)
It's a parent's worst nightmare and it's the worst feeling out there to know your child is out there somewhere, and you don't know if they're alive or dead. (Parent whose adolescent child went missing within the last year.)
It's like losing part of your identity and not being able to find it again. I feel guilty as some days I don't think about my sister as my day is busy, and then I feel guilty for not having thought of her and for living my life: because life around you doesn't stop no matter how hard you try to make it so. While I understand that rationally, emotionally I'm still grappling with it: and my sister has been missing for six years. (Sibling of an adult missing for between four and ten years.)
It feels like your heart has been ripped out and sometimes I can't control my feelings. Even though you have to keep surviving (and I often get very close to the edge of not wanting to survive) the only thing that keeps you going is hope. My family is not complete, and nothing will ever replace my lost boy. (Parent of a young person who has gone missing between two and four times.)

LIVING IN LIMBO RESPONSES
It is a living and never-ending nightmare. While we can reassure ourselves that they are happy and peaceful somewhere else, the reality is we will never know until we find them. And then, equally as horrible as the idea of never finding them, is the idea of finding them not alive and well. It is like living in a constant state of limbo and contradiction. (Family member of a 21 year old who has been missing for between one and three years.)
It's not dead or alive. It's nothing in between. Just endless how, why, what and when. Wondering what could have been. No place to say goodbye. No grave to place a rose. (Parent of an adult missing for more than ten years.)
The loss changes over time and affects different areas of my life at different times. For example, at the moment, even though my father went missing seven years ago, the loss and pain feels the same now that the case is going through the Supreme Court. (Child (now adult) of a man who went missing more than ten years ago.)
The whole missing persons experience was so weird; I didn't know what to do when it first happened, but I've gotten more used to it, so maybe experiences help others. (Parent of an adult who goes missing repeatedly.)
Ground-hog day. I've spoken with many people, including my husband, who see it as akin to a death. Which of course it's not because there isn't the same support. (Sibling of an adult who went missing more than ten years ago.)

SO IF SUPPORT WAS OFFERED, WHAT SKILLS WOULD PROFESSIONALS NEED?

Families were asked to reflect on the specific skills a counsellor or support person might need when supporting people after someone has vanished. For some, their reflections relate to real-world examples of what it means to receive care; for others, it's an imagining of what would have allowed them to feel better supported if the 'right' service had been available for them.

One respondent noted that an awareness of disenfranchised grief (see Support Document One) was key. This means helping people come to a point where the loss can be integrated into their life without an outcome being available to them, or all of their answers to 'what happened'. Facilitating a connection to the missing person, similar to the concept of Neimeyer's (2006) making meaning in the midst of loss (see Support Document One), means that they can still actively love and reflect on the loss of the person who is currently missing.

Quite simply, some respondents said that the counselling community needs to understand what this type of loss entails, and that rarely the counsellor themselves would have been exposed to this type of loss, or have very limited exposure in their professional or personal life. A respondent, who was the sibling of a person who vanished more than ten years ago, felt that ambiguous loss was 'way worse than having a parent or loved one pass away', but that 'experiencing care from specialised counsellors at FFMPU – even for some who had attended counselling there more than a decade ago, was currently still helpful for their emotional wellbeing'.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU OFFER SUPPORT?

Living with the disappearance of a missing person is a high-impact loss, and counsellors experienced in this space of trauma, stress, grief and family therapy/conflict need to have relevant skills. FFMPU acknowledge that private counsellors or counsellors who do not regularly encounter families of missing people shouldn't be expected to, or have the capacity to offer, case management. The literature identifies that counsellors can prepare for individuals or families before their first session by doing the following:

- Be familiar with the texts and literature available regarding ambiguous loss as well as the strategies shared via the FFMPU website.
- Be well-versed in evidence-based models of trauma, stress and loss (see below).
- Reflect on your own thoughts of ambiguity – how comfortable are you in tolerating the unknown?
- In first sessions or first interactions with the family or friend of a missing person:
  - name the loss that has occurred, normalise the experience of uncertainty and acknowledge and explore meaningful connections with their missing loved ones, and
  - recognise that you can assist families to be the experts on their experiences.

THERAPEUTIC CONCEPTS TO USE WHEN SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF MISSING PEOPLE

Ambiguous loss: the term 'ambiguous loss' (sometimes also referred to as 'unresolved grief' in the literature) identifies the physical absence of the individual without confirmation as to whether or not the loss has finality or a known outcome.

Complicated or anticipatory mourning: the first edition of the counselling framework in 2007 identified that families shared the fact that to have someone missing was not a 'dress rehearsal' for their grief if the missing person was eventually located deceased. However, Rando's exploration (2000) of complicated mourning does have some relevance for families of missing people because it allows a space for exploring grief without making people feel as if they are 'failing' at the tasks of mourning. It acknowledges all of the complexity that comes with a unique type of loss like missing, and identifies that in an ambiguous loss space, awareness of this work is useful in identifying the key challenges of living with the unknown.

Disenfranchised grief: this grief, as noted by Doka (2002), is defined as a type of grief that is not commonly recognised by the community. It sits outside the 'expected' losses we experience in our lifetime. The stigma that can come from this type of loss – because of people's hidden beliefs about how others should manage their loss, and the lack of understanding from the support professionals tasked with responding to them – can mean that an additional layer of stress can be created by a loss that is poorly understood.

MODELS OF INTERVENTION THAT COUNSELLORS CAN EXPLORE FURTHER

Trauma therapy models, as noted by FFMPU, and with reference to the work of Judith Herman. This also includes theoretical approaches related to post-traumatic growth opportunities, as noted by Wayland (2015) and referencing with the work of Bonnano (2009).

Narrative therapy: Freedman and Combs (1998) suggest that using a narrative approach allows clients to be heard or validated and explore alternate meanings on life that accompany ambiguous loss. This is also helpful in mapping the impact of a person being missing (as noted by narrative therapist White in 1998), and can assist in exploring family stressors, resources and perceptions, which can then be used as a treatment strategy in the counselling room.

Healing narratives: the seminal work of Frank (1995), who explores in his book, *The Wounded Storyteller*, ways for people to discover their own stories alongside their trauma. The three narrative techniques used within his work, and applied in the counselling space, reflect on: 1. Restitution narratives, which can help with the factual retelling of the missing person's narrative; 2. Chaos narrative, which helps people to identify the range of emotions and constant thoughts occurring or ruminating when a person is missing; and 3. Quest narratives, which are a space for the counsellor to help reframe the experience of ambiguous loss and to locate some connection to the turbulence.

Continuing bonds: this is a way to reconnect or challenge the erasure of the person, when only the 'missing' component is focused on in the media or the investigation, and to find ways to help reconnect people with the memories of the person who is lost.

METHODS FOR INTERVENTION AS NOTED BY THE LITERATURE

Cognitive behavioural therapy with mindfulness (CBT-M): as noted by Lenferink (2018), this is a strategy that uses the basic principles of CBT alongside meditation skills to recognise 'thinking traps', or grief ruminations, and challenge persistent or unhelpful thoughts. It is important to address cognitive-behavioural variables in treatment, such as negative cognitions and avoidance behaviours (Lenferink).

ABC-X model of family stress: this is most suited to family groups responding to the loss of a missing person. The model, as noted by Betz (2006), is useful due to its broad systemic approach where people can have shared perceptions of loss and can help people redefine or create new meaning and rituals surrounding their loss.

Acceptance and commitment therapy: as noted by Wayland (2015) and FFMPU in consultation for this report. The model assists in helping people to reflect and understand their core values and the ways in which these values assist in living a meaningful life alongside their loss.

Mindful self-compassion: a way to enhance a person's capacity for emotional wellbeing. The strategy allows the counsellor to help people acknowledge their difficult thoughts and feelings and to acknowledge the vulnerability that accompanies the loss of a missing person. This can also be used alongside compassion-focused therapy (CFT).

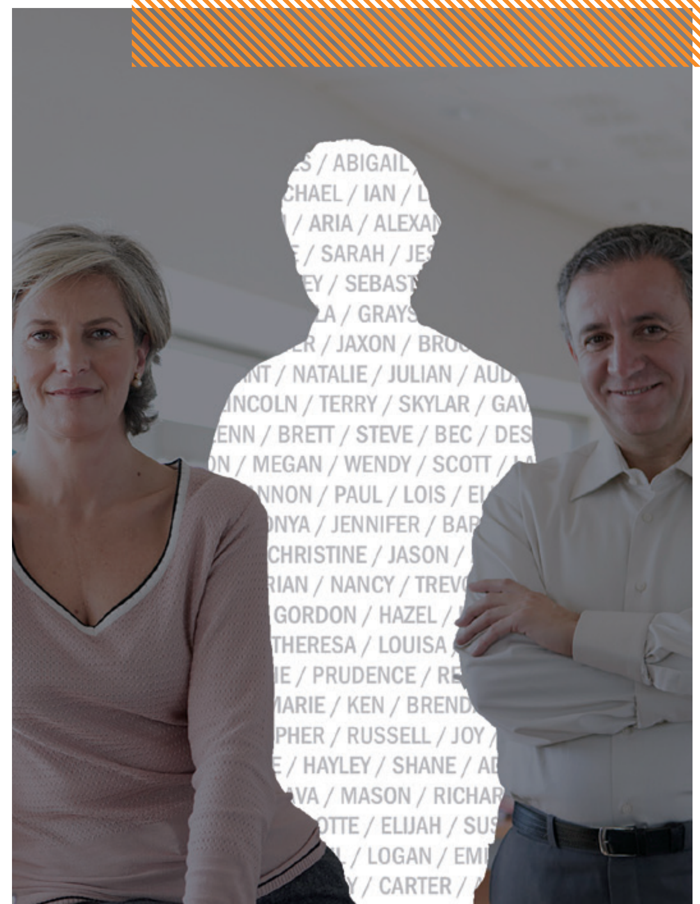
GOALS OF THE INTERVENTION

There is no long-term goal in terms of the therapeutic outcomes of counselling for families of missing people other than to:

- provide a safe space for people to explore their loss
- feel heard in relation to the impact of not knowing
- identify strategies that might assist them to manage the ruminations of ambiguity
- explore both hopefulness and hopelessness as their life continues.

The role of the counsellor is to identify that the concepts useful in exploring the lived experience of loss are available, as well as that the therapeutic modalities and approaches have been utilised from both here in Australia and overseas to respond better to families and friends of missing people. The counsellor, alongside the individual, can cherry-pick the necessary components of the literature that are relevant to the person that sits across from them (or answers the phone that rings in the workplace) to co-construct new ways to navigate the loss of the person they describe.

The goal for the counsellor in clinical supervision might be to set aside what they think they know about the experience of having someone missing, challenge the assumptions that may come from those thoughts, and truly listen to help people challenge the ruminations that arise. Boss (1999) tells us that closure is not the goal; remaining person-centred and open to learning about the loss, even if it extends long term, is the key.



GUIDELINES FOR POLICE RESPONDING TO FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PEOPLE

GUIDELINES FOR POLICE

GUIDELINES FOR POLICE RESPONDING TO FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PEOPLE

Police are often the first responders when a person vanishes. The role of law enforcement sits in an operational space – where investigative procedures are enacted depending on who is missing and under what circumstances. However, as with the vast descriptions of the differing responses to how people react when someone is missing, the way that the police can provide support also differs, depending on the investigation and the role of the family as next of kin.

Edkins (2011), in her analysis of the politics of 'missingness', identifies that for families of missing people, 'there is a disjuncture between the responses of relatives and those of the authorities'. The processes and practices required to practically investigate, legally administer, and then supportively respond to a case means that responses cannot be neatly articulated into one space in terms of what families of missing people 'need'.

The family's focus is to have the missing person back, with the goal of police intervention to locate the missing person or ensure their wellbeing. The intertwining of contact between families and the police, at significantly traumatic periods, can lead to unintentional support provision. Remember, the **respondents of the survey attached to this project noted that the police were in a position to understand and respond to their support needs best**.

The ongoing relationship with the police is the most significant relationship for many families of missing people when exploring ways to survive the investigation. For some, the support offered by the police built their hope and made them feel they were part of a team. One family identified that the 'stars were aligned' (Wayland, 2015) when she was coupled with a homicide detective to help her unravel the new evidence regarding her missing son. Whereas other families, for example who were given news bluntly or were not yet ready to hear the police or coronial perspectives on their investigation, felt that their conceptualisation of hope differed to the people they hoped would help them. It's a tension that can shift depending on the status of the investigation. Police need to be aware of this.

In addition to police, forensic investigators play a role in contributing to the healing process for families of missing people in terms of being reunited with remains or learning with certainty that remains are not their missing person. This relationship is often overlooked. Hofmeister (2017) explores the fact that **information can be viewed as control**, and that providing families with information on the search, and, if the person is located deceased, the process of identification, allows the family to take control through being involved in the sharing of information. Being informed, being invited in to the decision-making process, changes families from the status of helplessness to hopefulness, not always in terms of hope for the return of life as it was prior to the person going missing, but to their capacity to impact what is occurring in their lives. The idea that police and other investigators invite families to ask 'what now?' is one of the important aspects of support in these types of situations.

Wayland (2015) notes that the participants of her PhD study shared a belief that if a person cannot be found, the police will 'step in and locate them', and that this worldview can become problematic once someone goes missing. **For families, the letting go of the concept that the police could solve the mystery of the missing person's disappearance was something they had to accept.**

WHAT IS HELPFUL FOR POLICE TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT WORKING ALONGSIDE FAMILIES OF MISSING PEOPLE?

The families of missing people, across a number of research studies, suggested that small things, such as **communicating sensitively, calling when you say you will, and communicating even when there is no news, is helpful**. The adult child of a person missing for more than ten years explained: 'the void ... the emptiness ... the lack of support ... helping with making the police keep family members up to date, even if nothing has eventuated'. For families of longer-term missing people, where periods of decreased hope exist – such as after a media appeal, or a sighting that does not eventuate in a location – asked that police need to **tread gently** or help families to explore alternate supports that would be helpful for them.

Betz and colleagues (2006) note that in the early days post-disappearance, the family may wish to tell their story over and over. It is within these stories that meaning, or sense, occurs. Hofmeister (2017), in a recent analysis of forensic investigations in Latin America involving searching for missing people, reminds us that 'these are not rickety bones to be forgotten', and that irrespective of time passed for the families left behind, the missing person is still part of everyday life. The social negation, or 'erasure' of the person from missing person narratives provides limited opportunity for people to speak openly about the person who has been lost. Families still want to talk about the importance of who the missing person is, irrespective of how long they have been gone for.

WHAT MIGHT NOT BE HELPFUL?

In Section Two of this booklet, the literature highlights the concepts that families of missing people might find challenging – terms like ***closure, acceptance and diminishing of hope***. Families were not necessarily receptive to police insistence that they should accept their loss, even when available evidence suggested otherwise. Matters being referred to the coroner can also be a time of great stress and sadness for families.

Given police are not employed to provide emotional support to families of missing people, it may be difficult to foresee, manage or support at every interval while the person remains missing. Both sides – families of missing people and the police – *need to accept that vulnerability, and police need to identify what support services are available in their jurisdiction that could support the ongoing needs of families. For police new to long-term missing persons investigations, there is also the issue of responding to past operational decisions that had an impact on the family*, as explained in the survey: 'In our case I feel that we were let down in so many ways right from the beginning by the police and the official people who should have and could have put an end to our grief a lot sooner, but part of the problem was the era combined with our family's isolated rural location and "small world" understanding. ***Seeking workplace support in order to respond to historical traumas may assist in developing new working relationships with families.***

Overall, the respondents to the survey noted that the police and their own friends and families were also in a position to understand and respond to their **support needs best**, following those counselling services funded to specifically support families of missing people.

GUIDANCE FOR THE COMMUNITY WHEN OFFERING SUPPORT TO FAMILIES OF MISSING PEOPLE

GUIDANCE FOR THE COMMUNITY WHEN OFFERING SUPPORT TO FAMILIES OF MISSING PEOPLE

Ambiguous loss is very complex, and psychologists should spend time learning more about it so that families of missing persons can feel supported. I found it far more beneficial to speak with other families of missing persons (mainly through social media, Skype etc.). (Sibling of a missing person, located deceased four to ten years after vanishing.)

The mental health sector has been at the forefront of promoting the lived experience of people in order to help others living with similar stories. Participation of people with lived experience – to other families and friends of missing people – can provide the opportunity for people to reach out for support that is authentic and can sometimes mirror their own experience.

The missing persons sector in Australia has had a number of high-profile missing person's cases where the families have gone on to develop services or foundations in order to raise awareness. Part of this awareness raising has also been in offering informal support when other families experience loss. If you are seeking ways to share your own life story with another person, as a way of providing support, be mindful of the following factors:

The support doesn't need to be overly specific. FFMPU reflected that families found that hearing from other people with their own experiences of missing can normalise how they are learning to respond to their ambiguous loss.

Contact can be over the phone, Skype, via social media or in person. This does not need to be a huge investment of time, but a way to reach out.

Having lived experience does not mean you have the capacity to 'fix' another person's trauma. Sharing your own coping strategy is a way to offer new insights for people.

Be mindful of your own triggers – some can be anticipated and some can be sudden. Reflect on the impact of your offer of support and diarise ways to care for yourself in the process.

WHAT ABOUT OTHERS WHO DO NOT HAVE LIVED EXPERIENCE BUT WANT TO OFFER THEIR HELP?

I don't want people to fix things, I want you to simply listen. I want to be able to verbally discharge everything emotionally because some days it all seems like too much. I want you to simply listen. Sometimes that's the best support you can provide. (Sibling of a person missing for between four and ten years.)

The community plays a significant role in offering support to people left behind. In conversation with FFMPU, this was identified in terms of both practical and emotional support. The community is reminded that irrespective of the time since the person vanished, offering space for people to talk and asking how help can be delivered is key. The community also offers additional layers of support by being potential witnesses of missing people, sharing news about sightings and offering evidence that may be of value to investigators. Linking families with referral options is also useful.

Moore (2011) notes that communal 'hoping' for the potential location of the missing person provides some level, albeit limited, of insight into the experiences of loss endured over time. However, engagement, or seeking out ways to offer support, needs to happen at times that are not just anniversaries or peaks in news about the person. Linking families with strategies like the Missing Persons Advocacy Network or The Unmissables project, provides space to connect the left behind with their missing person by inviting the community to witness their loss.

It is a very public grief, since you need to keep the memory and image of the missing person alive in people's minds. This is not a grief you can go through quietly, privately and at your own pace; you are obliged to be open and to raise awareness. (Family member of a person still missing.)

The FFMPU document *Missing people: A guide for family members and service providers* (2014) notes that there is an intersection between practical help (policing) and the impact of telling others via the media. In addition, legal and financial issues (often shared via factsheets) provide information to additional professionals who need to be involved. There are a multitude of people that become involved in the tapestry of life for families left behind. A research project conducted in 2004, with post-conflict families in Kosovo who had a child missing, were supported by social workers (Arenliu and colleagues, 2017). The study identified that family members who reported **higher levels of social support** (from family, friends and their local community) had higher levels of post-traumatic growth. Their potential for growth, whilst living with the loss of the missing person, related to a sense of being active in raising awareness around missing persons issues; a concept reflected by those whose lived experience provided assistance to others in similar situations. Thus, they were able to find new meaning and purpose while at the same time still experiencing the missing of their child.

Understanding the impact of the assumptions we have about why people vanish, and recognising that this is a form of loss that does not match with traditional ideas of grief and bereavement, was reflected by the respondents of the survey:

Ostracism is a big one. People find it hard to provide reliable support during trigger times. Probably because there are important times within the community and people understandably including professionals want to focus and spend time with their own family, and have respite from supporting families like mine when it is most needed. (Parent of an adult who went missing more than ten years ago.)

MICHAEL / IAN / LILY / CAR
RILEY / OWEN / CHLOE / JACK / SCA
ELIZABETH / DEAN / HENRY / AUBREY / SE
ALAN / MILA / GRAYSON / PHILLIP / ADDISON /
ROOKLYN / DAVID / ZOE / CALEB / PENELOPE / ELI / LU
ANDREW / NORA / DYLAN / STELLA / LINCOLN / TERRY / SK
GLENN / BRETT / STEVE / BEC / DESMOND / TRISH / WAYNE /
OTT / LAURA / ROBERT / ASHLEY / JOHN / DYLAN / AMY / SIMON
NGELA / SEAN / JOANNE / PATRICIA / JAMIE / SONYA / JENNIFER /
ARTIN / KERRY / CHRISTINE / JASON / ANTHONY / LYDIA / CAROLYN / LI
NANCY / TREVOR / MELISSA / HELEN / CRAIG / NOEL / HENRY / ROY / ANN
/ DARREN / GLEN / LISA / RAYMOND / KATIE / BEATRICE / THERESA / LO
/ VERA / SIMONE / CHARLIE / KYLIE / PRUDENCE / RENATA / FRANCIS / STA
LEX / DAN / SARA / LIZZIE / MARIE / KEN / BRENDAN / DEBORAH / JOHNATHON / GREG /
RISTOPHER / RUSSELL / JOY / SUZANNE / RODNEY / JAKE / WARREN / KIM / PAULINE / J
/ NICOLE / YVONNE / NOAH / EMMA / LIAM / OLIVIA / ETHAN / AVA / MASON / RICHARD
LIVER / ISABELLA / BRAD / AIDEN / CHARLOTTE / ELIJAH / SUSAN / AMELIA / REBECC
RPER / JAMES / ABIGAIL / LOGAN / EMILY / JACOB / ALEXANDRA / MADISON / JACKS
/ LILY / CARTER / AVERY / DANIEL / MARK / EVELYN / LUKE / SOFIA / WILLIAM /
CHLOE / JACK / SCARLETT / BEN / STEVEN / BRYCE / SARAH / JESS / GABRIEL /
AN / HENRY / AUBREY / SEBASTIAN / LAYLA / WYATT / GRACE / JAYDEN / LESLIE
ON / PHILLIP / ADDISON / TANYA / RYAN / HANNAH / ISAAC / VICTORIA / PETER
ALEB / PENELOPE / ELI / LUCY / GRANT / NATALIE / JULIAN / AUDREY /
STELLA / LINCOLN / TERRY / SKYLAR / GAVAN / JUDY / LEXI / TROY /
BEC / DESMOND / TRISH / WAYNE / SAL KATE / BIANCA / GORD
/ ASHLEY / JOHN / DYLAN / AMY / SIMO ANNON / PAUL /
CIA / JAMIE / SONYA / JENNIFER / BARR
ON / ANTHONY / LYDIA / CAROLYN /
N / CRAIG / NOEL / HENRY / ROY /
IE / BEATRICE / THERESA / LOUIS
CE / RENATA / FRANCIS / STACEY /
ON / GREG / EDWARD / VERONICA /
JULIE / HAYLEY / SHANE / ADAM / NICOLE / YVONNE /
IA / LUCAS / MIA / OLIVER / ISABELLA / BRAD / AIDEN /
/ HARPER / JAMES / ABIGAIL / LOGAN / EMILY / JACOB / ALEXA
/ CARTER / AVERY / DANIEL / MARK / EVELYN / LUKE / SO
E / JACK / SCARLETT / BEN / STEVEN / BRYCE / SARAH
NRY / AUBREY / SEBASTIAN / LAY
TANYA
/ MARGARET
RREN / GLEN / LISA / RAYMOND / NRY / ROY / ANNA /
KYLIE / PRUDENCE / RENATA / FRANCIS / STACEY / JACQUELINE / ALEX / DAN / SARA / LIZZIE / MARIE / KEN / DESIREE / WALTER / CONN
ON / GREG / EDWARD / VERONICA / CHRISTOPHER / RUSSELL / JOY / SUZANNE / RODNEY / JAKE / WARREN /
EY / SHANE / ADAM / NICOLE / YVONNE / NOAH / EMMA / LIAM / OLIVIA / ETHAN / AVA / MASON / RICHARD
/ ISABELLA / BRAD / AIDEN / CHARLOTTE / ELIJAH / SUSAN / AMELIA / REBECCA / MAX / BENJAMIN / HAR
MILY / JACOB / ALEXANDRA / MADISON / JACKSON / ELLA / MICHAEL / IAN / LILY / CARTER / AVERY / DAN
FIA / WILLIAM / ARIA / ALEXANDER / RILEY / OWEN / CHLOE / JACK / SCARLETT / BEN / STEVEN /
MATTHEW / ELIZABETH / DEAN / HENRY / AUBREY / SEBASTIAN / LAYLA /
GRAYSON / PHILLIP / ADDISON / TANYA / RYAN /
LOPE / ELI / LUCY / GRANT

GUIDANCE FOR THE MEDIA WHEN WORKING WITH FAMILIES OF MISSING PEOPLE

GUIDANCE FOR THE MEDIA

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Community campaigns related to the missing person naturally include media involvement. That involvement occurs at significant milestones, anniversaries and potential sightings of the missing person. For media professionals, it is important to understand that all created forms of media enhance hope. **That hope can be absolute** –increased media will allow for the location of the missing person. **It can also be quite small** – a chance to remind the community that the family or police are still searching, or for clues to be shared. What we know from conversations with families of missing people is that this period of enhanced hope can be tempered with sadness when the location of the missing person is not the conclusion of media involvement.

UNDERSTANDING THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND WHY FAMILIES OF MISSING PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH THE MEDIA

Part of the decision by families searching for someone missing to connect with the media can be at the request of the police as well as fulfilling the yearning to have 'tried everything to bring them home' (Wayland, 2008). Since the advent of social media, families have become more media-savvy, but they can still be faced with the challenge that media interest is selective and dependent on whether the disappearance is considered newsworthy (Moore, 2011). Making families aware of this decision about newsworthiness can be difficult, but it is important to share with them.

UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF THE MISSING PERSON'S IMAGE

When using the image of a missing person, remember that the picture is a way for families to actively show the pain of loss and is a visual cue that demonstrates to the community that they have been left behind (Walsh, 2007). Respect the image because it allows the missing person to become relatable – families want to appeal to people's capacity to recall who their loved one is and that they are lost. Remember that the missing person's image is not a memorial image, the way we might share images when a traumatic death has occurred. The missing person's image has a different capacity; it has the power to reverse the loss by prompting the sharing of information to bring a missing person home rather than reflect on their absence. The family of Daniel Morcombe, a 13-year-old boy missing (and later found murdered) from Queensland, Australia, in 2003, noted that the media allowed them to both remind people that they were still searching for their son's remains, as well as repaying the kindness of the community for attempting to support them through the continued disappearance (Wayland, 2011).

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF MEDIA STORIES ABOUT MISSING PEOPLE

The media can offer more information to the community in addition to helping with searching. Media stories allow families to tell the story of their ambiguous loss, which in turn educates the community about the complexity of living with a missing person's absence. The media plays a role in shaping community perspectives. They can provide an eyewitness account of the details of what occurs when a person is missing, and promote help-seeking for people living with the loss of a missing person.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR MEDIA STORIES SUPPORTIVE:

- Provide details for people to share information about the missing person via Crime Stoppers or state and territory police jurisdictions.
- Offer readers the chance to contact 24-hour helplines, such as Lifeline, Kids Helpline or MensLine.
- Practise self-care strategies if you are a journalist. The stories of missing people can be vicariously traumatic. Connect with colleagues and engage with workplace support if needed.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Coles (1989) reminds us that 'the people that come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. We have to remember what we hear is their story' (p. 7). What is important for counsellors, health professionals, police and other support people to recognise is that the first step in extending a hand to families and friends of missing people is to first challenge assumptions about what is behind our thoughts about how people 'should' present when searching and waiting for news of a missing person. Once a support person is engaged, they need to critically reflect on work – a capacity to provide space to explore the emotional reactions alongside the willingness to 'sit with' the mystery that accompanies a missing person's case.

Support means more than just lending a hand. It needs to be focused on the individual needs of the person who sits before you. By taking note of the interventions and strategies outlined in this booklet, there are ways in which delivering support can be implicated in enhancing the wellbeing of families and friends of missing people.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE:

- Providing sustained and evidence-based delivery of support that explores the impacts of stress, anxiety, grief ruminations and the long-term effect of an unresolved loss.
- Service providers who sit outside of the health service delivery space accurately identifying how their relationship, and how they respond supportively, can better support families and friends of missing people.
- Counsellors using up-to-date information and knowledge about therapeutic interventions to better respond to ambiguous loss.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES:

- Identifying what the lived experience is for families and friends of missing people so that public awareness extends people's initial fascination with missing persons cases.
- The media better understanding its role in offering space to families to tell their stories and seeking new ways to share stories that offer insight into the longer-term impacts of ambiguous loss.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING NEW KNOWLEDGE:

- While recruitment for the survey was encouraging, more work needs to be done to identify support needs post-location for returned missing people.
- The rate of people going missing continues to climb; therefore, addressing what it means to come home, from the missing person's perspective, can complement the work already done with those left behind.

For more information about missing people, prevalence, response and stakeholders working in the space, as well as referral details for support, visit www.missingpersons.gov.au

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Counsellors seeking guidance – please visit;

  Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit
  www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au
  Phone: 1800 227 772
  Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

- Service providers wanting information about groups that might be relevant for their clients;

  Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit
  www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au
  Phone: 1800 227 772
  Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

- Police seeking support options for families and friends of missing people;

  Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit
  www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au
  Phone: 1800 227 772
  Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

  Beyond Blue
  www. beyondblue.org.au
  Phone: 1300 22 4636
  Chat and email online through their website

  SANE Australia
  www.sane.org
  Phone: 1800 187 263
  Email: info@sane.org

  Community Mental Health Services

  GP referral

- Crisis support needs;

  Lifeline
  www.lifeline.org.au
  Phone: 13 11 14

  Suicide Call Back – Service
  www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
  Phone: 1300 659 467

- Family members wishing to connect with other families for practical and emotional support;

  Missing Persons Advocacy Network
  www.mpan.com.au

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APPENDIX A: IN DEPTH EXPLORATION OF SURVEY DATA

APPENDIX A: IN DEPTH EXPLORATION OF SURVEY DATA

Seventy-four respondents, who self-identified as having a person missing, responded to the survey shared between March and June 2018. All of the respondents had to self-report as being over 18 years of age and located in Australia. *(Two people noted that they had no experience of having a person missing; their data was removed from the survey given inclusion criteria required being able to relate to the experience of having a person missing.)*

The participants ranged from 21 to 91 years old. Ten self-identified as men, with the remaining 64 being women. Three respondents indicated that they were from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background and all but one spoke English at home. From a location perspective (which is important to reflect given access to counselling and support services across Australia), 42 respondents lived in a metropolitan region, 20 in regional areas, ten in rural and two in remote geographic locations.

At the time of completing the survey, just under 60% of respondents said that the missing person had not yet been located. Fourteen (19%) stated that the missing person had been found alive, and another thirteen (18%) reported that the person had been located deceased. Two respondents stated that they were unsure whether the person had been located at present.

From a service delivery perspective, in terms of being referred to or receiving support, 92% of those who said the person had been found alive were ***not*** offered any additional support after the person had been located. This is important given the rate of return of missing people. Almost 78% of those people who stated that the missing person had been found deceased also said they had ***not*** been offered support after the location of the body. These are important demographic and support provision statistics to reflect on as you read about the experiences of families who took part in the study.

EXPOSURE TO THE EXPERIENCE OF HAVING SOMEONE MISSING

Exposure to uncertainty and trauma, when a person vanishes, is not reliant on the relationship type, the length of time the person is absent or the reasons as to why the person may have intentionally or unintentionally left (Biehal and colleagues, 2003). This means that anyone, anytime, might experience someone going missing and be exposed to the trauma of not knowing the person's whereabouts.

The AIC data (Bricknell and Renshaw, 2016) notes that there are individuals who go missing more than once. This was reflected in the survey data with just under 20% of the respondents having exposure to two to three episodes of a person going missing, and five people having lived through more than four episodes. The experience of 55 of the 72 respondents related to having *one* person go missing once in their lifetime.

The survey then asked respondents to choose one incidence of having someone missing and reflect on that experience for the remainder of the survey. Earlier research studies, such as Clark (2007), Glassock (2011) and Wayland (2015), highlight the common occurrence of parents sharing their lived experience of ambiguous loss. In this data collection, however, the main relationship type came from siblings of a missing person (26% of respondents). The next significant group related to parents of missing people (16) with other relationship connections being child (13), other family relation (11), friend (7) and partner (3). Two of the four who selected 'other' stated that the missing person was an ex-partner.

Fourteen respondents reflected on the experience of loss where the person vanished less than one year ago, with 25 people referring to a loss that occurred between one and ten years ago. An even larger group who shared their reflections noted that the loss occurred more than a decade ago (33 respondents). It is important to include the reflections of individuals with people missing for various lengths of time.

In my own study (Wayland, 2015), we sought to include only experiences from people who had a person missing for longer than one year to ensure there had been adequate amount of time to explore how their loss and associated hope shifted. These combined reflections, in this study, identify earlier thoughts as well as those that emerge in the long term. Both have been included for support people to review. Information regarding relationship to the person missing was also included in my study, as was the missing person's age at the time of disappearance (which ranged from between six weeks of age and 79 years). Just under 70% of respondents noted that they were 'very close' to the person who went missing. The remaining respondents described themselves as 'moderately close' (11), or 'a bit close' (10). One person shared they were 'not at all close' to the person who went missing.

When asked if they were aware of why the person went missing, 24% stated they were unsure, with the majority noting concern for the person's mental wellbeing (21%), misadventure (13%) or that the person was the victim of a crime (28%). The remaining 11% chose to respond as 'other', citing complex reasons relating to individual circumstances, such as family trauma, criminal behaviours and drug-related disappearances. Foy (2004), in her doctoral study exploring risk assessments for police when responding to missing people, identified that the reason for the absence can only be what is 'known' by the family at the time of reporting. The reason for the absence cannot be verified without the input of the missing person. Readers should be mindful of this.

IMPACT ON THE LIFE OF THE RESPONDENT

Irrespective of the perceived closeness of the relationship, the survey respondents noted overwhelmingly that the loss of the missing person **'disrupted my life in a significant manner and I still feel the impact'** (55), while fifteen people noted that 'a disruption occurred, but they no longer feel this way' or that the disruption occurred for a time-limited period. Two noted that the disruption had 'somewhat' of an impact on their life. It is important not to assume that the loss will be catastrophic for all, but that the length of time the person is missing can impact the ongoing nature of that trauma. It is also important not to presume, when offering support, that location of a body identifies closure for people. Those who noted that the loss was significant, and still continued, were also people where there had been a resolution to the missing person's location.

CRISIS SUPPORT RESPONSE

Of those who responded to the survey, almost 75% said the primary method for support in the immediate time after their loved one went missing was offered by ***their*** **friends and family**. After that, police, and the person's workplace (in terms of time off, or reduced duties) were significant in terms of crisis support. **One quarter of respondents said they had no support from anyone.**

From a therapeutic perspective, only ten people accessed counselling either face to face or via a helpline, with the same amount seeking support through the sharing of social media posts about news regarding the missing person. Anecdotally, the reaching out for counselling support often occurs after the crisis period has passed. In the immediate time after the disappearance, families are actively engaged in searching or liaising with the police. Counselling requires time and capacity to identify that additional support is required, and this is sometimes not possible in the hectic days post-disappearance. However, unintentional support provision by those assisting with the investigation is relevant to consider.

WHAT SUPPORT WOULD PEOPLE HAVE LIKED IF THEY HAD THEIR TIME OVER AGAIN?

Respondents to the survey were asked to consider whether the requests for support would differ considerably to what had been offered at the time of the disappearance, if circumstances or offers for help could be revisited. **The majority stated that practical help in negotiating with the police, and more search assistance would have been most useful** (n=41). Following that, **counselling would have helped in terms of the impact of the loss** (34). Practical assistance via their workplace through time off from work, or transfer of carer responsibilities to someone else, would also have reduced their burden, coupled with some financial assistance (17). Ten respondents noted that *nothing at all* would have helped.

Fourteen respondents shared short-answer narratives relating to this question. Half of these noted that a more enhanced, systemic response from police would have been optimal ('police not having assumptions', 'the police to do their job properly', 'transparency from police' in sharing health information about the missing person). Other assistance relating to key government agencies connected with missing people, such as coronial processes or legal support, were also shared. Interestingly, one respondent noted that a 'liaison person' who could assist with booking counselling sessions would have been received well, in addition to media training to assist with sharing news about the missing person.

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