When Someone is Missing

Understanding Your Experiences

“The real victims in ‘missing persons’ cases are often the family and friends”

Learning about the disappearance of a loved one can give rise to a multitude of effects. Like a stone tossed into a pond, the effects can ripple into a number of life domains. As a family member or friend of a missing person, you may experience changes to your health, your employment, your quality of life, your relationships, your finances, and most of all, your mental health.

Using the Australian work of Henderson and Henderson each of these areas is explored in turn. However, because this resource is particularly focused on mental health matters, mental health is explored with a degree of detail. If you would like more information, please visit [www.missingpersons.org.au](http://www.missingpersons.org.au)

Effects on Health

Many family members and friends of missing persons experience negative health effects. These are usually a direct consequence of the missing person’s absence. However, some pre-existing conditions may be worsened by the stress associated with the disappearance of a loved one.

The health concerns commonly experienced by family members and friends of missing persons are usually symptoms of stress[2]. These include:

- Appetite changes
- Chest pains
- Chills
- Clenched fists
- Clenched jaw
- Constipation
- Cramps
- Diarrhoea
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- High blood pressure
- Increased sweating
- Increased urination
- Indigestion
- Lack of coordination
- Migraine
- Vomiting
- Muscle aches, pains and twitches
- Nausea
- Sleep disturbance
- Startled responses
- Tremors

Needless to say, these symptoms have a significant impact on the well-being of those who experienced them.

However, there may also be long-term health effects that are not immediately apparent. For instance, the stress and trauma often experienced by those with a missing loved one can affect their body’s ability to resist or combat illness and disease. Extended stress can also worsen existing medical conditions or trigger those that have not been diagnosed yet.

Another health concern relates to behaviours that place health at risk. Family members and friends of missing persons may have poor eating habits; they may not exercise regularly; they may also use addictive substances, like caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol unsafely. These, in turn, place their health at risk.

Effects on Employment

When a loved one is missing work life can be disrupted. This might be because time off work is taken to search for the missing person, or to deal with the emotional stress of the situation. Yet, even when time off work is not taken, you may still have trouble maintaining your ability to function at work. This is often because it is hard to concentrate.
Effects on Quality of Life

Searching for a missing loved one takes a lot of time, effort, and energy. Evidently, everyday routines are disrupted. Bedtime comes at a later hour; sleep patterns are disturbed; meals are eaten on the run, if at all; time off work is taken; children in the family have time off school; and other family members or friends leave their own routines to baby-sit children, or comfort those who are distressed.

Your quality of life may be affected in other ways. You may overlook the emotional needs of other family members; there may be reduced involvement in social and leisure activities; and important celebrations may be missed.

Effects on Relationships

In light of the traumatic event that has affected your life it is likely that you will experience relationship changes. There may be more stress and tension in family relationships. This may continue even when the missing person has returned home as there may be a breakdown of trust and a degree of hostility directed toward them.

Effects on Finance

Family members and friends of missing persons also experience financial problems. You may incur costs through your efforts to search for your missing loved one. You may also experience a loss in earnings, health-related costs, legal costs, and property loss or damage.

Effects on Mental Health

Without doubt, the disappearance of a loved one can affect your mental health. There are changes to both thought processes and emotions.

Some of the common changes to thought processes include:

- Difficulty in making decisions
- Difficulty in problem solving
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Disorientation
- Flashbacks
- Forgetfulness
- Impaired judgement
- Inability to unwind
- Increased caution and doubt
- Loss of control
- Memory problems
- Negative thoughts
- Nightmares
- Poor attention span
- Problems managing time
- Procrastination
- Slowed thinking
- The ‘what if’s?’

Some of the common changes to emotions include:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Blame
- Concern
- Confusion
- Decreased pleasure in life
- Depression
- Distress
- Embarrassment
- Emotional withdrawal
- Fear
- Frustration
- Guilt
- Hate
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Irritability
- Loss of confidence
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Numbness
- Regret
- Sadness
- Shame
- Shock
- Tension
- Trauma
- Worry

Collectively, these responses demonstrate the variety of thought changes and feelings that you may experience. Furthermore, these (and other) reactions may be experienced with different degrees of intensity.
In the face of adversity sometimes particular emotions are expected. For instance, we might expect feelings of anxiety, distress, and depression to surface. However, we may not expect to experience other emotions, like relief. Relief and a sense of freedom can emerge when a loved one is missing, particularly when relationships with the missing person were strained before their disappearance. After a long period of chaos, tension, and instability in the relationship the absence of the missing person can provide a sense of relief and peace. And sometimes these feelings give rise to a sense of guilt for feeling this way.

It is important to recognise that the disappearance of a loved one gives rise to a wide array of emotions – both negative and positive. These experiences are quite typical among the family members and friends of missing persons.

However, the disappearance of a loved one creates a unique situation. There is much confusion about where the missing is and whether they will return. This brings about feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and insecurity. These feelings were described by those who participated in the Henderson and Henderson study:

“The survey asked what was considered to be the most difficult part of the whole experience. People often identified the uncertainty, for example, not knowing whether the missing person was safe... not knowing where the person might be... or just ‘not knowing’ generally... Other issues identified included dealing with the emotions generated... and accepting that the missing person had left home... Others mentioned not knowing why the missing person left... feelings of helplessness and not knowing what action to take... the waiting... diverse issues relating to police action (such as waiting for 24 hours) or concerns about whether and when to report the person missing to police... and how to deal with the missing person when located or returned home”.

This situation cannot compare with losing a loved one through death. When someone dies family members and friends can attempt to seek closure. They know the whereabouts of their loved one; they can mourn their loss, and they have the opportunity to say goodbye. This is reinforced by conventional social practices. When an individual dies funerals often take place. These rituals are used to mark the event and aid the grieving process for family members and friends.

However, when someone has disappeared there is no comparable ritual. The family members and friends may be living in a cloud of doubt not knowing where their loved one is, or if they are safe. Some academics call this disenfranchised grief or ambiguous loss because the loss felt by those left behind is confusing and unclear. The next chapter explores this and other mental health issues often experienced by the family members and friends of missing persons. It also discusses positive ways of coping with unhealthy, negative emotions.

*Adapted from “Someone is Missing” from the Mental Health Association NSW Inc. and Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, Attorney General’s Department of NSW

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service which offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

In addition, telephone assistance can be obtained from Life Line on 13 11 14 and from Grief line on 9596 7799.

The Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm, Monday through Friday.