

FACT SHEET

When the missing is without end

In her recently released masterclass to coincide with National Missing Persons Week www.missed.org.au/alm, missing persons expert and Manna MCR Dr Sarah Wayland shared her 20 years' experience regarding ambiguous loss. This unique, complex, protracted grief accompanies the disappearance of a loved one.

Families have been inadvertently retraumatised by the processes undertaken by police, search and rescue staff, media, mental health professionals and even friends that aren't equipped to support them at this challenging time. Here we provide a summary of *Ambiguous Loss 101* for all those who encounter families at the painful intersection of hopefulness and hopelessness.

"Ambiguous loss does not get easier to accept over time; it gets more complicated," Dr Wayland said. "Families can feel very alone and silenced by their experiences. When working with the families of missing persons, the goal isn't closure. It's about understanding what was lost, what is missing and how people can be encouraged to survive not knowing."

How does ambiguous loss present for families when a loved one goes missing?

A missing person is someone whose whereabouts are unknown and there are concerns for their safety. In the early days, the person's family and friends grapple with the idea of the person coming back, with many not even entertaining the idea that they may never be found. With long-term missing persons, the sense of loss can be unending. Unlike death, there is no closure, and family and friends may ultimately have to learn to live without answers.

Considerations when engaging with and supporting the family and friends of missing persons

- Every person who goes missing is not just a missing person. They have lived a full and meaningful life before going missing.
- Acknowledging the grief that family and friends feel from the outset is critical to them being heard.
- How long the person has been missing and the circumstances are important. While loved ones may sometimes never know or understand why a person has gone missing, the context shapes their experience.
- All those with relationships to the missing person (family, friends, work colleagues or even acquaintances) should be

honoured. All may be emotionally impacted and need support.

- Loved ones can experience complicated and anticipatory mourning, whereby daily activities are clouded by considerations of the grief that lies ahead. Support people are advised not to suggest that all hope is lost. Providing support is about learning to be guided by how the family is feeling and how the investigation is progressing.

Common reactions from family and friends of missing persons

While reactions will vary, there are some common responses, namely:

- Stress and anxiety can sometimes be expressed as anger and agitation. Stress is also associated with having to navigate police and media engagement, managing expectations and having to be constantly 'switched on'.
- Preoccupation with the missing person. This can be accompanied by an inability to work, socialise or meet regular commitments, confusion, heightened emotions and avoidance.
- Intense sadness and frustration.
- Trauma, not just around the circumstances of the loved one going missing, but imagined trauma of what might have occurred while the person is lost.

- Disconnection. So consumed are family and friends with their trauma and sadness that they cannot engage with their community.
- Physical ill-health, as an impact of psychological loss.
- Emotional burnout.

“A loved one going missing significantly disrupts the lives of family and friends,” Dr Wayland said. “The repetitive retelling of their stories can be exhausting and have emotional and physical impacts. Even the finding of the missing person deceased provides little comfort; they must still live with the trauma associated with them having gone missing.”

Support for those left behind

- In the early days, family and friends need practical help engaging with police, the media and time away from their workplaces.
- Counselling can be useful, but is generally most appropriate further along their missing persons journey.
- Providing opportunities each day for difficult conversations on how loved ones are feeling can be very beneficial.
- Police liaison and regular updates are seen as a valued form of support.
- Connecting family and friends with others who have had missing persons experiences offers vital peer support from those who know what they are going through.

Role of police

In the early days of a missing person case, family and friends can place great expectations on police investigators and searchers. They must also become familiar overnight with police processes. Over time, even though families have typically developed long-term relationships with police, they may also need to face the hard truth that even the police cannot help find their loved one.

“It is important that police deliver updates as promised, even if it is to tell the family that there is no news,” Dr Wayland said. “Police officers should always remember that they are talking about a much-loved person who happens to be missing. Family and friends may not only want to talk about the investigation but also the person they have lost and what they stood for. The language police use can have a profound impact. They should take their cues from family and friends on whether to refer to the missing person in the present or past tense.”

Dealing with the media

In this era of social media, families sometimes launch their own campaigns to locate the missing person. Be wary that this carries with it a risk of community speculation, unwanted online comments and even breaches of privacy. Before engaging with the media, family and friends should establish what they feel comfortable sharing.

Dealing with the media longer-term can take an emotional toll. Loved ones are encouraged to consider what personal cost they are prepared to pay for media exposure and what represents a good investment of their time.

“Media engagement is both a tool and a challenge for the families of missing persons,” Dr Wayland said. “In the push and pull of media attention, they can find themselves having to revisit and reflect on traumatic stories, which can be painful. Equally, the media needs to be respectful, to stop and engage with the family, and to listen to the stories that are important from their perspective.”

A final message

“Hope is a journey and not necessarily a positive emotion,” Dr Wayland said. “Over time it changes. Every day may be different for family and friends as they learn to tolerate the unknown. If we can all become better at mastering that uncertainty, then we can better support the loved ones of missing persons.”