

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH MISSING FAMILY MEMBERS

Every day, people go missing during armed conflict, violence, migration, or disasters. Their fate is unknown, and their families do not know whether the missing are dead or alive. The families live with uncertainty and many search for their loved ones.

People with missing persons will be affected, and they should know, that it is the situation that is abnormal; not the persons experiencing having a missing family member. How people react to this ambiguous loss varies, even though there will be some common themes:

- Continuous uncertainty about missing persons has consequences that last and affect many areas of a person's life such as emotional (loss, sadness, and hope), psychological (inability to make decisions), physical (aches, pains, and sleep disturbances), cultural (feeling distant from one's culture, which may not acknowledge the loss), economic (loss of a provider), and social (identity is not clear as one is neither married nor single; no burial).
- There may be an increase in family conflicts and relationship difficulties as members process the loss in different ways.
- Difficulties with being present in everyday life and engaging in life without their missing family members.

HOW TO SUPPORT

By receiving support, most individuals can learn to adapt and live with the experience of ambiguous loss, focusing on their present lives and investing in their personal growth. To help families maintain their daily routines and manage ongoing uncertainty by focusing on 'living well with' or 'despite' their situation, rather than 'stop living' until the ambiguity is resolved, the following advice may be useful:

- Acknowledge the loss and any distress by listening to the descriptions of persons going through the loss.
- Normalise their feelings by using language to affirm their experience: "It is understandable to feel..."
- Support the 'need to know' by undertaking an active approach to tracing the missing persons.
- Be sensitive to cultural norms and how the cultural context affects the impact of the loss. Questions could be phrased: "How is having a missing loved one viewed in your cultural group? Where could you find support in your community?"
- Adopt a global support approach that may include assistance with legal and civic matters, enable connection to others including associations of people who have experienced a similar loss, as well as advocating for rituals and commemoration ceremonies.
- Provide realistic information and manage expectations about RFL services such as the timeline of any tracing file.
- Practice communicating news in a psychosocially supportive way.
- Practice self-care to be able to continue to support; It is important to remember that the stories of enquirers are not your stories. Do not take them nor the sadness home.
- Learn to tolerate uncertainty. It is not always possible to locate a missing person.

For more tips and information about working with families of the missing: <https://ifrc.csod.com/>

Everyone needs to know what has happened to their missing relatives. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement helps trace the missing and the Restoring Family Links network brings families together again, wherever, and whenever possible.

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