

MANAGING THE STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRAUMA OF A MISSING FAMILY MEMBER/ FRIEND

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You and those close to you have experienced a significant and likely traumatic event – someone you love has gone missing and you don't know where the person is or if the individual is okay. This experience isn't routine or a normal part of life – most people don't have to endure something like this. Please understand that this is a *significant* stressor. This handout is designed to help you and your family better understand your reactions to this horrible set of circumstances so you can better manage your reactions and decrease the chance that you will have significant long-term health consequences as a result.

Having a missing person in one's life is like no other type of loss. The person was here one day and gone the next – but you don't know why or where the person went. You may feel like you are in limbo, completely alone, numb, afraid, out of control, helpless, angry, hypervigilant – you may feel all of these things in the span of one day (or even one hour!), or you may experience other, entirely different feelings. It is important to understand that you have a right to your thoughts and feelings, and that you are doing all you can to cope under these difficult circumstances. It is a hard reality to consider that you may not have answers about your loved one when you want (which is NOW), but you may have to live with this lack of clarity for a while – and you don't know how long that while may be. It is vitally important that you take care of yourself – if not for yourself, for your family and friends and for the one that you love who is lost.

We've developed this sheet in the format of frequently asked questions, so you can zero in on what you need at this point in time. What you need may change, so hold onto this information and refer back to it. Remember: you have a right to your thoughts, feelings, and reactions, and an obligation to care for yourself – if not for you but for the others in your life who are waiting and searching, too.

Q: Why do I react one way to the disappearance and other people in my life react so differently?

You all are under an incredible amount of stress. Stress is a normal reaction to a demand or threat (called a stressor) that results in physical, mental, and emotional responses. One's experience of stress is not determined by the event itself, but rather by one's perception of the event. It is personal and individual. No two people respond to the same event in exactly the same way due to each person's unique psychological make-up, life experiences, and physical

condition. Try to be patient with the reactions of the other people in your life – talk to each other about your reactions to the event so you can better understand. Approach these conversations with an open heart and mind.

Q: What sorts of reactions do people have when they face a stressor?

There are all kinds of reactions that are associated with stressors including cognitive (thought processes), emotional (feelings), behavioral, and physical. For example, **cognitive** responses can include confusion, uncertainty, hypervigilance (always searching for the missing person), suspiciousness, intrusive images, tendency to blame others, difficulty solving problems, difficulty concentrating, problems with alertness and awareness of surroundings, and depersonalization (feeling like this is a dream, what is happening isn't really happening to you but to someone else). **Emotional** responses can include fear, guilt, grief, panic, denial, anxiety, agitation, depression, irritability, anger, shock, being overwhelmed, apprehension – emotions can be all over the place under significant stress. **Behavioral** responses include withdrawal, angry outbursts, inability to rest, changes in appetite, hyper-alertness to the environment, change in communication patterns, and increased use of substances or engaging in escapist activities. **Physical** responses can include fatigue, nausea, fainting, twitches, dizziness, chest pain, headaches, increased blood pressure, and rapid heart rate. As you can see, there are many stress-related responses that one can experience. It is normal to have these reactions and what we have listed does not include everything that one may be experiencing.

Q: How long will these reactions last?

Having a person missing from your life is not a one-time stressor. It is a series of stressors that occur over time, so it is difficult to say how long the resulting feelings will last. For example, dealing with law enforcement over time, mounting searches, exploring leads, and dealing with the unknown are stressors that may come and go after a disappearance. What is important is that you acknowledge that your reactions are normal, and while you can't make the stressors go completely away, you do have the power to manage how you react to these ongoing challenges.

Q: I feel so out of control! What can I do?

When someone goes missing, it completely rocks our sense of control over the direction of our lives, and as human beings, feeling in control is important to emotional well-being. But, if we are honest with ourselves, there are very few things in life that we do ultimately control, so now is the time to focus on those. Try to maintain as normal of a schedule as possible. Take control of as many of your daily decisions as possible – even small things can make a difference. For example, if someone asks you what you want for dinner, give an answer even if your first reaction is to leave it up to the other person. Make choices that are going to help you weather this difficult storm – get enough rest, eat a well-balanced diet, don't make any big life changes – focus on what you can do TODAY. When our lives feel like they are spinning out of control, some people have a tendency to project into the future – they imagine what could be instead of focusing on what is, so they can feel more in control. But this is merely an illusion, and they

may lose sight of what they can do right now to deal with the situation at hand if they spend too much time in their heads projecting into the future about what may or may not be.

Q: I feel alone and isolated but I don't want to bother other people with my problems. How do I deal with this?

One sure way to decrease feeling of aloneness and isolation is to connect with other people. Reach out to others – people do care and talking can be one way to cope. If you have difficulty sharing your feelings with trusted friends and family, at least spend time with them doing regular activities. Likely there are other people in your life who are at least partially aware of your circumstances, and they may want to reach out to you but they don't know what to say. They may fear they will say the wrong thing or bring up difficult feelings for you, so it may be helpful for you to break the ice by sharing some of your feelings and checking in with them. You might say, "I think you are aware that Chris has gone missing. This is a really hard time for me and my family, and we are doing the best we can. I'm doing what I can to take care of myself, but I hope you understand if I'm not exactly myself." This may give someone an opening to provide you with needed support. More often than not, people want to do *something* to help, but they have no idea what to do. Let them help. Not only will it be beneficial to them, you are likely to get something out of it, too. Finally, you may need to seek professional help and that is perfectly okay. As was stated earlier, you've gone through a significant and traumatic event. A mental health professional can help you develop ways to cope with the stress – reaching out when help is needed isn't a weakness – it takes courage and is really a sign of strength.

Q: This hurts so much. What can I do to handle this emotional pain?

The pain associated with having a missing person in one's life can seem unbearable, but you and your family and friends can find the strength to cope. While it may not seem like it at times, our feelings will not cause irreparable harm or kill us, so it is best to let ourselves feel what we feel and avoid numbing out. People may choose to numb their feelings in all kinds of ways: drinking too much, taking drugs, spending money, eating too much – while these things may help you feel better in the short term, these behaviors are damaging in the longer term, and you and your family will be left not only with dealing with the stress associated with a missing person but with the fall out of addictive and counter-productive behaviors. When we are in the throes of intense emotion, it may seem like they will last forever, but they don't. They come and go, and you will have some respite. As indicated above, focus on what you can control, reach out to others, and seek professional help if needed. Be kind and compassionate to yourself. Realize you are not alone – there are many families that have experienced this sort of loss, too. Monitor yourself self-talk. Try to become aware of when you are being hypercritical of yourself, and substitute a more loving and accepting attitude toward yourself. You are going through a very difficult time – give yourself a break.

Q: People expect me to "move on" or "get closure." I can't! What can I do?

When a person is missing, no matter how long, closure is a myth. According to Dr. Pauline Boss, dealing with the disappearance of a family member or friend constitutes an ambiguous

loss, one in which there is no verification of death or no certainty that the individual will return and be as the person was before. Ambiguous loss can freeze the grief process and deeply impact family functioning, and it may help you to know that your reactions aren't due to something being wrong with you but are a result of the circumstances and the impact the situation has on one's relationships. While easier said than done, finding a deeper meaning in the situation, realizing that we can't control what happens to us, slowly figuring out who we are with the person missing, and normalizing the ambivalence we feel can help ease some of the effects. This requires open and honest communication with friends and family members, and working toward figuring out day-to-day life without the missing person. Each family member or close friend may have a different idea as to how this should play out, and without open communication, our relationships are sure to suffer. It can be very helpful to seek out family therapy or support during this difficult time from a professional who is familiar with ambiguous loss and its effects.

Q: I am a friend or family member of a person who has been deeply affected by a missing person. What can I do?

There are lots of things you can do, but the most important are to be present and listen when the person needs you. Listen carefully and try to be patient when the same story needs to be repeated over and over (that is common among people who have experienced a significant loss). It may be hard to just listen and offer your presence – you may want to do or say things that can “fix” things. But in situations like these, there may be nothing you can do to change what is happening or what the person you care about is feeling. Avoid giving false reassurances such as telling them they are “lucky it isn't worse” or that “it will all work out.” A traumatized person is not consoled by such statements. Instead, tell the affected person that you are sorry about what happened and you want to do what you can to understand and assist. Try not to take anger and irritability personally. Help the person with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, yard work, shopping or other chores. People who are experiencing significant grief may have a difficult time knowing what needs to be done so it may help to pitch in even if you haven't been asked to do a specific task.