

Words and artwork from young people who live with 'missing' and 'not knowing'

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Service
Victims Services | NSW Department of Communities and Justice

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There are so many questions and I think the not knowing is what hurts the most.



What is 'Missing'?

Someone is missing when it is not known where they are and family and friends are worried about them.

A report can be made with police who help search for them. They are not in trouble with police. Police will do everything they can to help find them to check that they are ok.

Police find most people very quickly, in the first few weeks. However, not all people are found quickly and this can be a very stressful time for everybody, including young people.

Did you know...?

A person is
reported
missing every
18 minutes.*

About
38,000 people
go missing in
Australia each
year^

*Australian Federal Police, 2020

^Bricknell and Renshaw, Statistical bulletin 01: Missing persons in Australia 2008-15





Disappointed when you tell someone and they don't say anything.

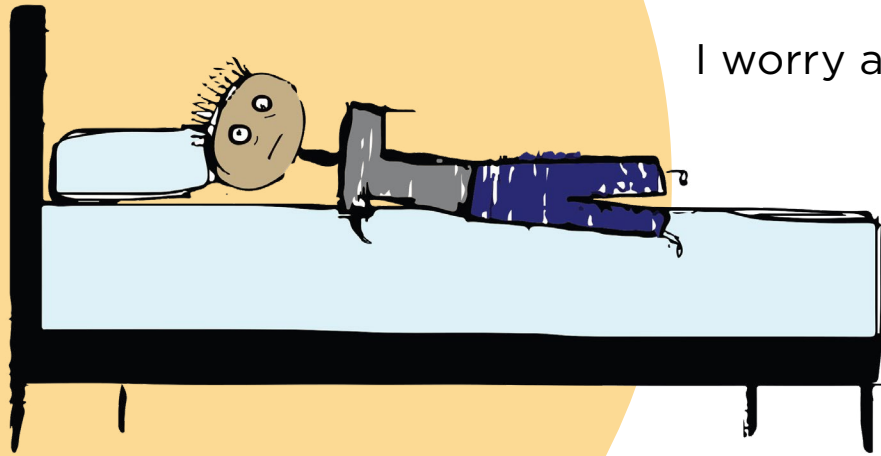
How it feels...



It's hard to talk about it.



I don't like being sad, but I am.

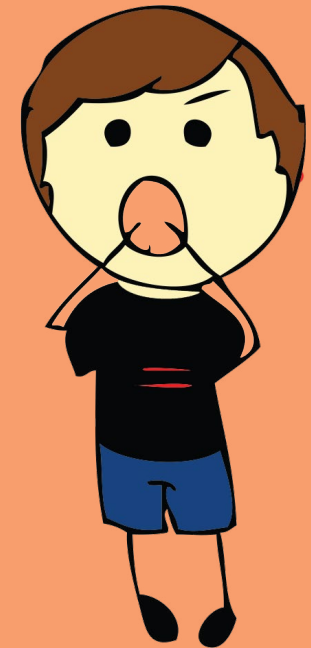


I worry about her.

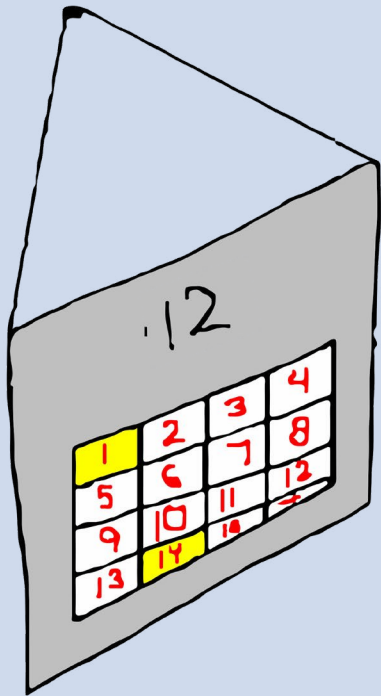
How it feels...



Listening to sad songs to reflect my feelings.



When I found out, I was shocked and angry and I didn't know what to do.



"But it was ages ago."

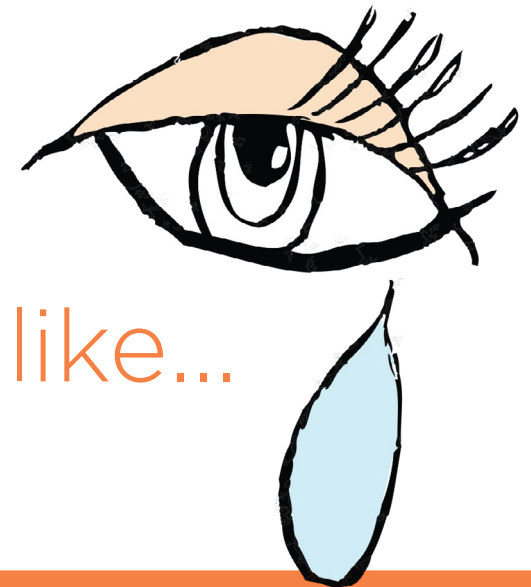


ONLY

"She's only missing. Worse things have happened in my life."

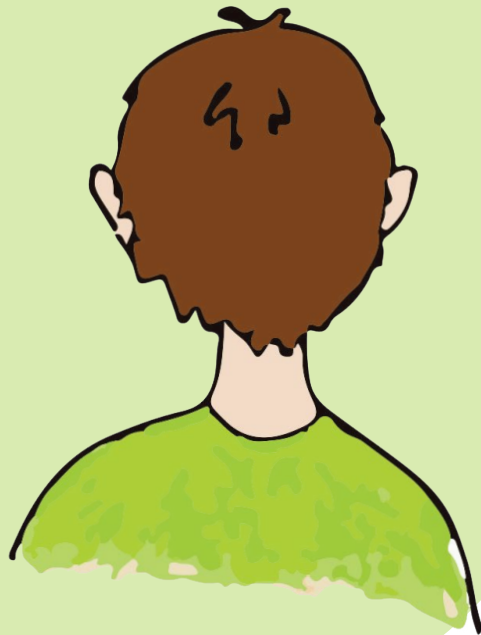
"Get over it."

"Move on."



Please don't say things like...


Please don't say things like...



"People always try to reassure me that he just ran away and probably has a massive, loving family of his own – that doesn't make me feel any better."

"You weren't even close."





When I tell someone about my uncle,
I just want them to tell me that
they will always be there for me,
not make up stories about what
they think happened to him.

What I want from others

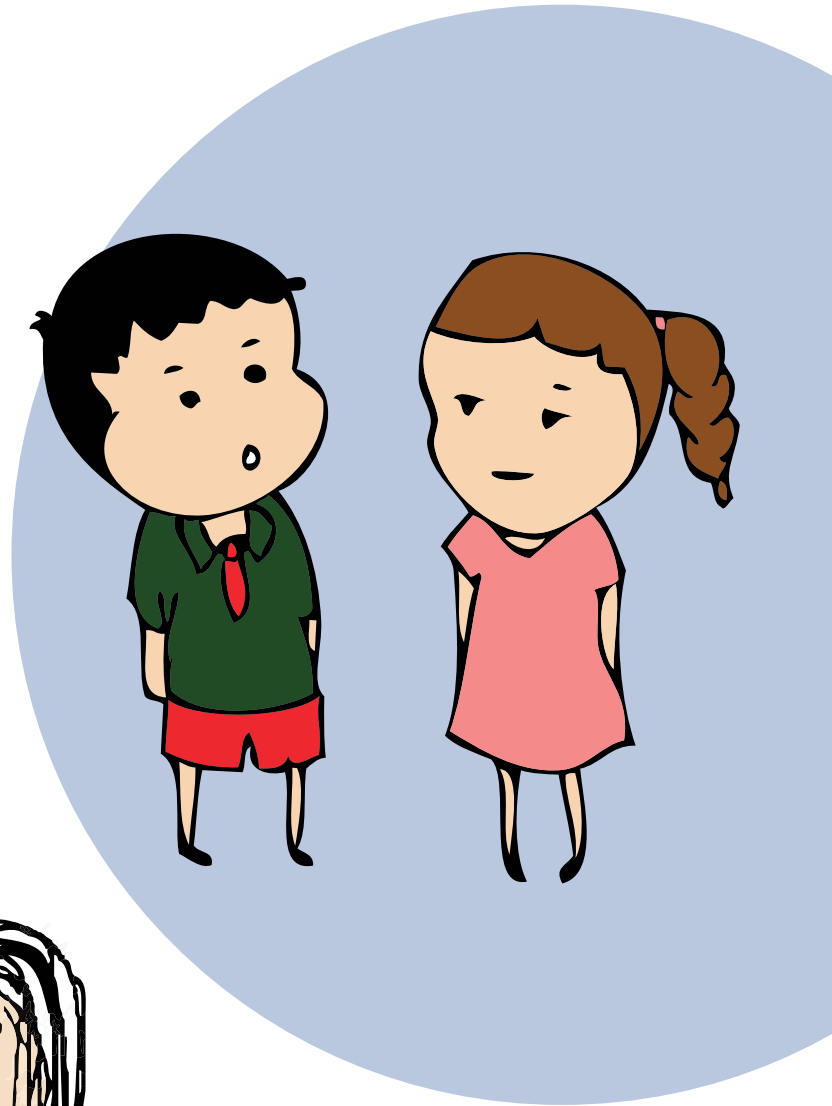
The best thing to say is "I'm here".





Sometimes I don't want to talk about it; I need to have privacy.

I like it when people listen and I like it when they understand.

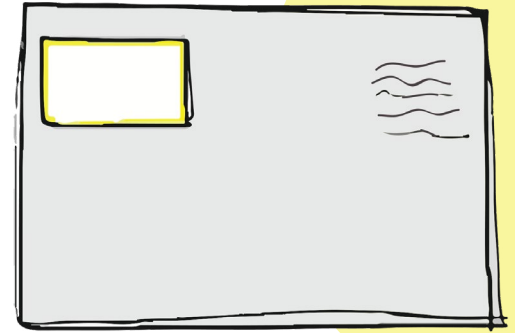


What I want from others



Friendly smiles are nice.

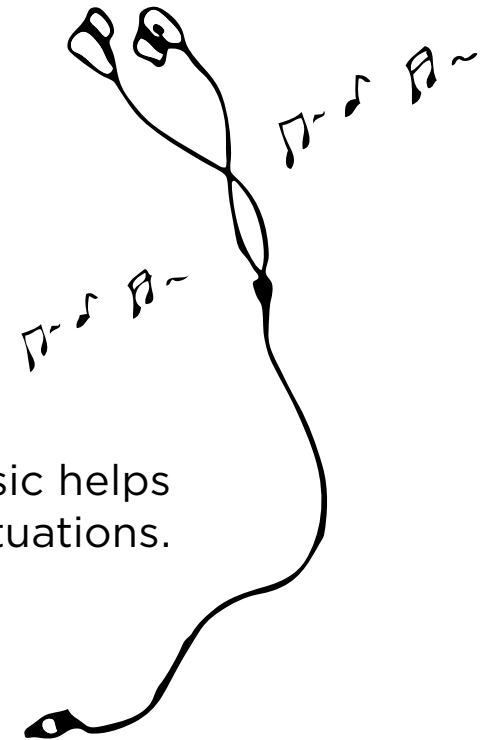
Writing letters
to nowhere.



What helps me

Relax and
let your
thoughts
flow.

Listening to music helps
me handle situations.

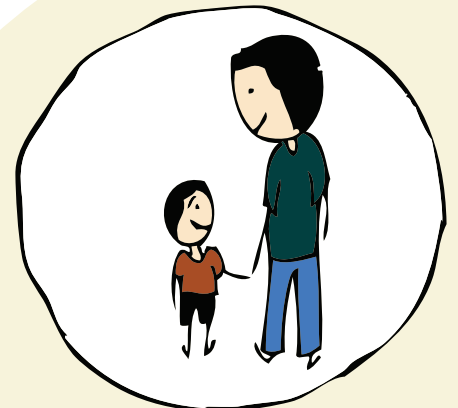


What helps me



My friend and I tell
each other everything
- the good and the bad.

Patting my cats and
talking to them
about it helps me
remember some
good moments.

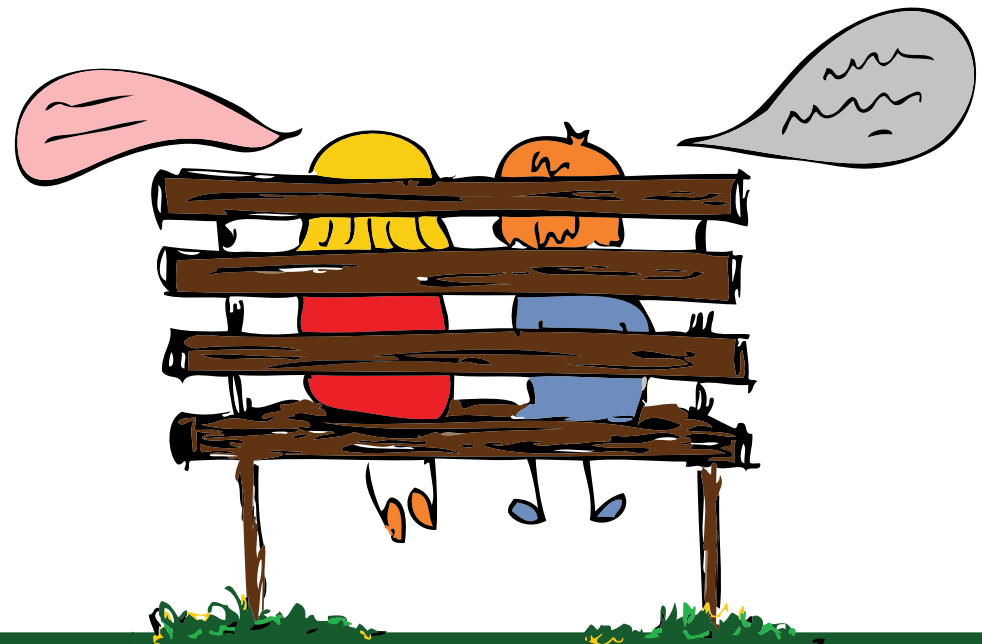




One time I was having a lot of trouble so I went to my friend's house and we went to the park and he just listened to my whole story then tried to make me feel better, but just being able to get the whole story out takes a big load off.

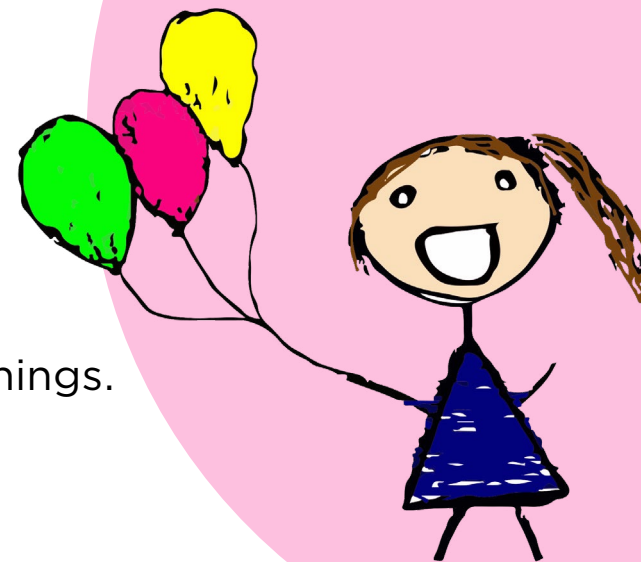
What helps me

I like to spend time with one friend and talk about it.





Reading keeps my
mind off things.



Doing fun things.

What helps me

Talking to my kitten because
she doesn't talk back.

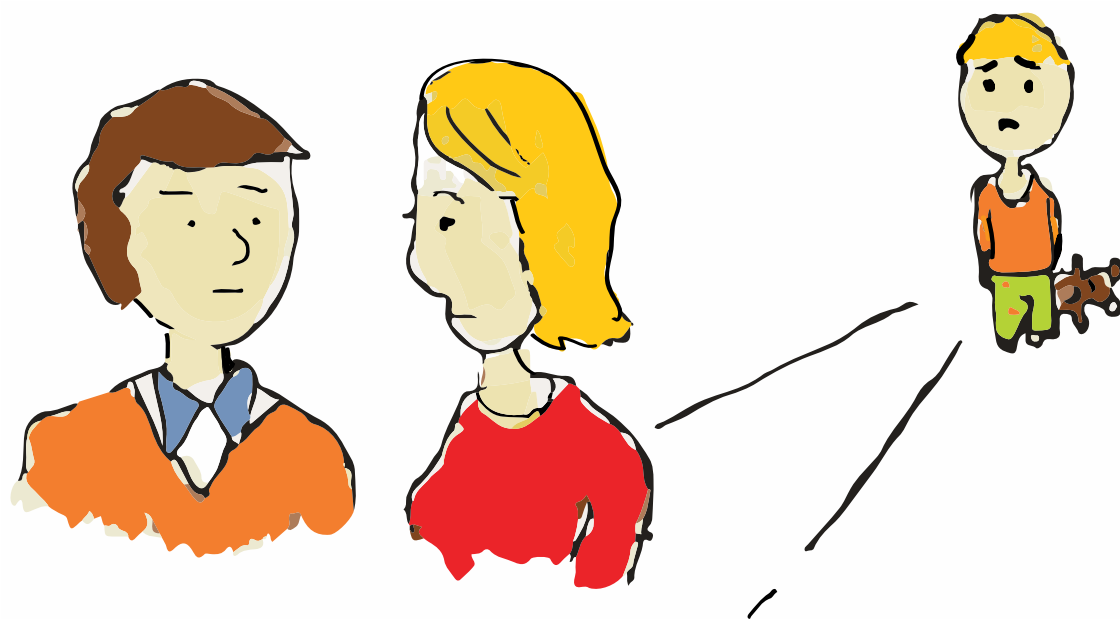




Please tell me what's happening. Even if you don't have all the answers, tell me what you know.

Young people and the right to be included

If you don't tell me and I hear people whispering I think something bad has happened.



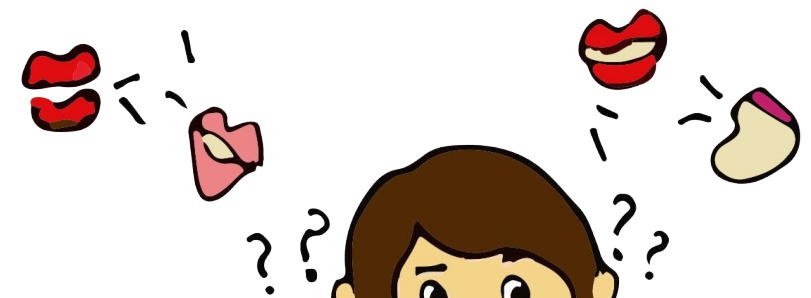
When someone goes missing
everyone thinks about the adults
and they think the kids are too
young to understand.



Young people and the right to be included



Young people matter too.



I had no idea what
was going on.

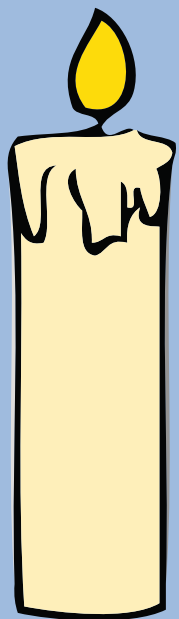
Dear Uncle Ian,
For your birthday we
had a Party. your family
and friends came to
celebrate your birthday and
think of you. We all miss
you. lots of Love from Emily and
every one who came.
XOXOX



Reminders

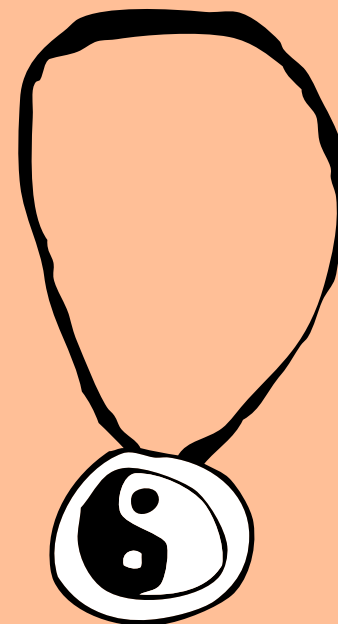


Emily - age 6

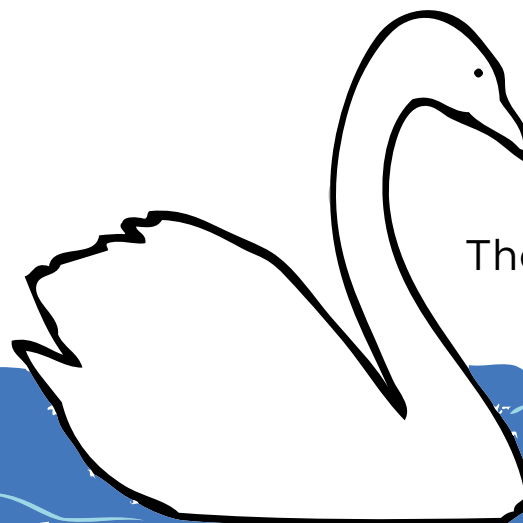


Your birthday...

The necklace
you gave me...



Reminders



The swan...

Lucy's story

But it was all
a dream...

Lucy jumped awake and looked around in the dark. She recognised the familiar shape of the lamp on her desk and the light from the hall under her bedroom door.

She'd been dreaming...not a scary dream, just a dream.

In her dream, Dad walked through the front door, smiled at her and said he'd been fishing up north. Nothing too out of the ordinary.

Lucy had felt a wave of relief sweep through her body. Lucy also felt just a shiver of anger at dad. Why hadn't he rung, even once, sent a postcard or even a text?

She wondered if Dad knew just how many people were really worried about him. She wondered if he knew that Mum and Nick, Dad's brother, had taken a photo of him when they went to talk to the police. Mum chose it because it was a "good likeness." It showed Dad standing next to Pop's fishing boat with his hand on her brother, Josh's shoulder. Josh was holding up a fish he'd caught, smiling with his front tooth missing.

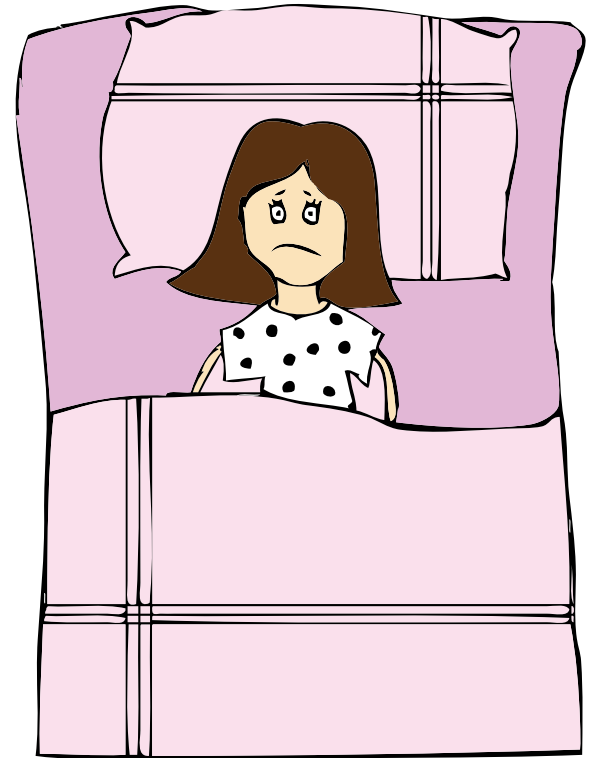
In her dream she wondered if Dad knew that he was listed as a 'missing person' and there was a picture of him on the internet.

But at least he's now home. Lucy couldn't wait to tell her Mum. She pictured her Mum coming home from work, dropping her bag and maybe some groceries in the usual place - the floor, putting the kettle on and then walking into the TV room to see Dad sitting there, like he always did on his days off.

Lucy hasn't seen her dad for more than six months. He went out one morning in the car to see his mate and just didn't come home. His mate hadn't seen him either. There had been no sign of him.

Lucy thought she saw him once when she was out with her mum. They had turned around and hurried back to check but it wasn't Dad. It felt like she could almost 'taste' the bitterness of the disappointment and the tears she blinked away. She didn't let on. She shrugged her shoulders and laughed (a little hollow laugh) at the way they had stared at a complete stranger.

Sometimes it just felt like last week since Lucy had seen Dad but other times it felt like years had passed. Sometimes she found it difficult to remember just what he looked like and



how he sounded, but then she'd look at the album she had with the photos of their last holiday up north. Dad had really enjoyed that holiday and had seemed really happy. He had talked about moving up north to live.

In the album there were photos of him holding her when she was a baby. There was even one where he looked like he was crying. When she asked mum about that, Mum had said that was just after she'd been born and

Dad had been crying with happiness. The album was something she pulled out when she wanted to remember exactly what Dad looked like, because although she knew what he looked like, she could look at the photos and see the differences and sameness in him. The times when he was fatter or thinner, when his hair was longer. She wondered what he looked like now. If he hadn't had a haircut his hair would be really long. Did he have a beard, and would anyone recognise him if he looked different from the photos the police had?

There were other things that reminded her of Dad. One of the things she kept in a secret place was Dad's favourite fishing cap - a crumpled old thing with a hole in it. It smelt like the shampoo Dad used. Looking at it made her feel a mix of happy and sad.

Why had he left it behind if he was fishing?

Lucy worried that if Dad stayed away much longer she might not be able to remember him at all. She worried that he might forget her. He had already missed her birthday and his own birthday. That had been really hard. On his birthday Mum, Josh and Lucy had gone to see Pop and they'd talked

about Dad and fishing and other times they'd shared.

Lucy had seen her Dad cry at other times too. She didn't always understand what was going on and why he seemed unhappy. She had wanted to ask but had thought "maybe not" because she didn't want to make her Mum worried. After a while she didn't ask, but she wondered whether Dad being sad and sometimes "not quite himself" had something to do with him going away. She would ask him one day.

Mum had guessed how worried Lucy was and had admitted to Lucy that she was worried too - the "not able to think straight or eat or sleep or think about anything else" type of worry. When she was able to sleep, there were times when she would wake up crying.

She and Mum agreed that "not knowing" was the hardest part.

She had been so worried that something bad had happened to him; like someone had hurt him, he was lost or maybe he'd hurt himself. Sometimes she had fears she couldn't even put into words. It felt like if she did they might come true, even though her brain knew that just thinking something couldn't really make it happen.

Lucy wondered if maybe she'd done something that had really upset Dad or

made him mad. Like fighting with Josh over something on Christmas Day. Now she couldn't even remember what the fight was about. She just remembers Dad saying couldn't they be nice to each other and at the time thinking why should this day be any different. Her brother was so annoying but she knew that he was worried too although he showed it in different ways. There were days when he was really quiet and others when he was just like he had always been. A bit like her. She still had homework to do, sleep overs with friends from school, chores around the house.

Lucy discovered that talking about her Dad helped a bit. It didn't take the sadness away but talking with Mum and sometimes with Pop was a help. They seemed to understand. They knew what 'not knowing' felt like. Her friends at school mostly didn't get it and sometimes it seemed harder to tell than just stay silent and when anybody asked about her Dad Lucy just said he was "away on business" or she avoided the question. She worried that if she told they would ask all sorts of questions she didn't know the answers to; and all the questions she asked herself like why did he go, where was he and would he come back?



Information for young people and adults

When someone we know or love goes missing we may feel frightened, confused and overwhelmed.

It can be hard to think about anything else and the thought of the person not being found safe and well can be too frightening to even think about.

If you're a young person you may not be aware of what's happening at first. This can be for all sorts of reasons:

- > The adults don't know what to say or how to say it.
- > They don't want to worry or upset you.
- > They may be hoping the person returns before they need to worry you by telling you about their fears or that they have made a missing persons report to the police.
- > They don't know what's happening and find it difficult to tell someone else when they don't know what's happening themselves.
- > They might think you're too young to be told.
- > Often adults are used to being able to provide answers and when someone is missing there are sometimes no answers.

What do I tell others? How do I answer their questions?

When a loved one is missing it can be difficult to know how to explain what's happening when much of what is happening is unclear or unknown. It can be really difficult to talk about your loved one being missing. You might worry about being able to control your emotion. The person receiving the information may respond in a way that disappoints or upsets you, sometimes because they are at a loss to know what to say.

There is always someone who will listen – a parent or other relative, a friend, teacher or counsellor. There can be others who find it difficult to know what to say and they can sometimes make you feel uncomfortable.

Some suggestions:

- > Keep it very simple. Talking about a missing loved one is really hard to do.
- > If there are people you want to tell, or think need to know, you can talk to someone you trust about how you might tell them.
- > It's better to start with the truth. If you hide the truth, you hide how you are feeling.
- > Expressing your feelings is important. You can do this by talking, or keeping a diary or drawing a picture.
- > Write down any questions you have. This will help you remember them when you want to ask about what is happening.

Information for young people and adults cont'd

Remember:

- > It's not your fault that someone you love is missing.
- > Don't be afraid to ask the adults around you for information about the investigation and what is happening. It is better to hear the truth than to 'fill in the gaps' by guessing or imagining what might have happened.
- > It's all right to say "we don't know where he/she is."
- > You don't have to tell everyone. It's all right to say, "I don't feel like talking about it."

Adults:

- > Keep your explanation simple and truthful. Stick to the information that's known.
- > It's all right to say 'I don't know' if you really don't know.
- > Don't make things up in an attempt to be reassuring for the young person; or try to 'guess' what has happened.
- > It can be very hard to start a conversation about a missing loved one with a young person but not as hard as having to carry on as if nothing is wrong.

- > It is all right for young people to see you upset. It gives them permission to be honest in expressing their emotions.
- > Young people usually know when the adults around them are upset and worried. Trying to hide what you're feeling can lead to young people feeling excluded and can cause them more anxiety in return. They may become more watchful and look for whispered conversations and the adults being upset.
- > Young people may try to 'fill in the gaps' if they're not kept informed about what is happening. If they fear information is being withheld they may imagine it's too awful for them to be told the truth. Their imaginations may lead them to images and conclusions that are vivid and disturbing when there is no evidence to support this.
- > Reassure the young person that you're not going anywhere. Young people may worry that if this can happen to someone they care about, it can also happen to another person close to them.

How long will it last? What has happened to the missing person? Why did he/she go? Is he/she alive or dead

'Ambiguous loss' is a term that is used to describe the type of loss that occurs when someone is missing. When someone we care about is missing, these questions and many others arise. There are few clear answers. It is difficult to understand and explain.

Understanding the term helps to explain the difficulties people experience when someone they care about is missing.

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Service

Who should I contact to find out more?

Victims Access Line: 1800 633 063 | **Aboriginal Contact Line:** 1800 019 123

Email: ffmps@justice.nsw.gov.au **Website:** www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au