



Beside you through grief's journey

# DEVELOPMENT OF A SUPPORT GROUP FOR FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

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## **FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS SUPPORT GROUP GUIDE**

### **Introduction**

**“ . . . families of missing people are somewhat comforted and consoled by basic human contact and the opportunity to share the experience”**

**(Missing People, *Leaving without Goodbye* [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk))**

Family support groups have proven to be one way for people to gather and gain strength through interacting with others who are walking down a similar path. Groups have developed for many reasons, such as:

- Helping families cope when a loved one suffers from a serious physical issue, such as Alzheimer’s disease, cancer or AIDS;
- Supporting family members struggling when a loved one has an addiction problem or mental health concern;
- Validating the frustrations and uncertainties that parents often encounter when a child has developmental challenges;
- Sharing the pain when a baby dies at birth, or a child is killed by a speeding car;
- Learning how to live a life free from domestic abuse; or
- Coming to terms with one’s own impending death.

All of these groups share the belief that ‘a sorrow shared is a sorrow lessened’. Those attending may find solace and comfort at a time when life’s journey is particularly challenging. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness can often be reduced by realizing they’re not alone.

Although support groups exist in many communities for people who were missing and then found deceased, whether through accidental causes, suicide or homicide these groups are held after the person’s body has been found and death confirmed. But what of those families where a loved one suddenly vanishes and years later the mystery of the disappearance has still not been solved? The uncertainty that pervades every day when someone is ‘here and yet not here’ can hardly be imagined. Others get on with their lives, and perhaps suggest to the loved ones that they do the same. But how? Isolation, and the feeling that no one understands, can be overwhelming. As one mother with a missing daughter said to me: *“People don’t know what to say; it’s like you have a bad disease or something, nobody wants to talk to you.”*

People, such as this mother, may find a support group to be their saving grace or at the very least a time when they can talk about their missing person, know they have been heard, and obtain some peace, even if only temporary.

The basic human need for connecting around a devastating life experience is the impetus for this guide. Adapt it to meet the needs of your particular group of participants, and always remember that those who have come to share their pain are the experts.



## General Guidelines

The most important piece in a support group for this underserved population is the right facilitator. The individual should be someone who understands the differences between someone going missing and someone who has died. Although certain aspects of general bereavement support groups are transferable, this population is not gathering to share and understand how the death of someone they love has changed their life, but to learn how to live with on-going trauma. Each day these families wake up not knowing if their loved one is alive and well, alive and suffering or possibly deceased. This not knowing they experience, sometimes for a lifetime, is one of the most traumatic events we humans can experience. And as a facilitator, we have to be comfortable enough in our bones to walk this journey with the people who come to a support group.

Many of the Best Practice Guidelines for Counselling Families of Missing Persons can be used to determine the 'fit' of an individual to lead these support groups (see Appendix #1). Be sure to tailor the group as appropriate depending on the cultural make-up of the participants. Ideally, the facilitator will also be able to offer individual/family counselling outside the group. Thus, a social worker, psychologist or other counselling professional with a background in loss and trauma would be well suited to this role.

Try to secure a room that has a warm, inviting feel to it. Your location will dictate the choices available, but be wary of hospitals, churches, funeral homes or other places that may have negative connotations for people. Neutral spots, such as office buildings or schools willing to donate space may be a better choice.

## SETTING UP YOUR SUPPORT GROUP

This guide is based on a six session closed group, although many of the suggestions can be adapted to groups with a different format. You will need to decide whether you want to set a limit on how many friends/family may attend if space is an issue or if you feel it's best to balance the group by not having more than one or two for each individual who's missing.

Specific suggestions for starting your group include the following:

- Groups can be held in the daytime or evening and should be about 2 – 2 ½ hours in length. Every two weeks or once a month might be a good interval for gathering, depending on travel requirements for the members.
- One or two facilitators can be used, possibly one professional and a volunteer.
- Facilitators are part of the group, and join in the circle time sharing. It's important that participants feel safe and comfortable with the facilitators as group leaders, but also feel a human connection that supersedes the divide between those with a loved one missing and others, including the facilitators.
- If you are fortunate enough to have someone who has experienced a beloved who went missing and is able to mentor others, that would be an excellent volunteer to use.
- You can start your group with as few as three or four participants if you wish, especially if you decide on an open group. Even a closed group can work with only a few as long as there is a commitment to attend.
- If most of the members of your group are Indigenous peoples you may want to consider having an Elder as the second facilitator. The guidance he or she can provide will prove invaluable and can help with opening and closing rituals that will be relevant to this population. A mixed group takes a little more creativity to ensure everyone feels comfortable, and may require add-ons, such as a smudge before the group begins for those wanting this. However, it is important to work towards a group identity based on the commonality of a missing loved one.
- Ensure the ground rules are carefully developed during the first session.
- Food is an important part of each session as all cultures come together with friends and families to share sustenance. You may want to have at least one item that is gluten-free, as this has become a very common food preference in our society of late. Something reflecting Indigenous culture, such as bannock, would also be a good choice.

***“If you really want to make a friend, go to someone’s house and eat with him... the people who give you their food give you their heart.” – Cesar Chavez***



## Overview of the Six Sessions

Each of the six sessions follows a general format. The opening is a sharing circle with a specific theme for that evening. This is followed by a discussion and sharing of the homework activity from the previous week. Next is a facilitator-led discussion based on the topic of the evening. Following a short break, the final part of the session will include different activities or further discussion, depending on the topic.

There is one or more homework assignments to be done during the week, with suggestions offered in Appendix #2. You may choose one or give the participants the choice of more than one if you prefer. Every session ends with a social time and refreshments. Each of the six sessions can include invited guests who share their expertise around the topic being highlighted that week. It is usually best if these guests present, respond to questions, and then either leave or stay for the socializing if their presentation is at the end of the formal part of the evening.

Again, feel free to adapt this overview to suit the needs in your area and the resources you have available.

### Session One

The main objective for session one is to build rapport among the participants and achieve an initial trust and comfort level with the facilitators. Ground rules need to be identified and discussed.

The first theme, Ambiguous Loss, helps validate the traumatic nature of the attendee's experience and offers a cognitive understanding of why the relentless stress they endure is a normal reaction to an abnormal life event. Giving their experience a name and normalizing their pain can go a long way in helping participants cope with their changed life.

Over the course of this first evening together, the unique character of the group will surface, thus suggesting ways in which the sessions may be augmented or altered to better reflect the participant mix.

Also in Session One participants are instructed to bring a picture of their loved ones to share with group members the following week.

## **Session Two**

In Session Two, individual narratives are highlighted. Participants have an opportunity to share the story of the disappearance of their loved one with others and talk about how various family members are processing the same event. Ensuring everyone has a fair share of the time available is vital. It is likely that this will be an emotional evening, so be sure to have lots of tissue available!

## **Session Three**

This session will focus on living with the uncertainty of not knowing what has become of their loved one. The emphasis will be on helping participants increase their resiliency to cope with the mystery and building self-esteem to protect them as they learn to live in the up and down world that is now their new normal.

## **Session Four**

In week four, the emphasis is on coping strategies, as attendees learn more about effective ways of managing stress.

Families of the missing may not have much time, energy, or motivation to devote to their own health; thus, it's necessary to present a smorgasboard of strategies and hope one or two take hold. As attention span may be at an all time low, it's likely best to focus on techniques that don't require a great deal of concentration.

## **Session Five**

Session Five is built around sharing resources to help with the trauma they're living. Each person will have discovered helpful and not so helpful resources within themselves, their family and their community. Discussion will centre around ways that work for them to move forward in life while holding on to the level of hope they feel is reasonable. These resources can be



gathered together for the following week and handed out as helpful reminders for people to take home with them.

## **Session Six**

In the final session, a discussion of hope and how it changes over time is initiated by the facilitator. Participants will share their feelings around the fluid nature of hope and how to weather the mecurial nature of this emotion. The evening will end with a shared meal and completion of evaluations. The group may also decide if they wish to exchange phone numbers and/or email addresses if that hasn't been addressed in previous sessions.

## SUPPORT GROUP FOR FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS



### Week 1

#### Theme: Ambiguous Loss

##### 1. Facilitator Introductions

Facilitators introduce themselves by their first names and explain why they're present and why they have an interest in helping families of missing persons

##### 2. Housekeeping details

Provide information on the facility and a general guideline for how the meetings will progress.

Discuss 'rules' for the group:

- Confidentiality – it is important that this is stressed
- Call if you are unable to attend so we don't wait for you
- Mutual respect and kindness to one another- no judging and no advice-giving unless asked
- Balance of talk/listen with an opportunity for all present to have input

- Limit side conversations
- One person speaks at a time
- Silence is acceptable – no one has to speak
- Explain the reasons behind the rules, and ask participants to approve and add

### **3. Sharing circle: Participant introductions**

Ask participants to share as much or as little as they like about themselves and share details about who has disappeared and when their loved one went missing. Each person is requested to bring a picture of their person next week. These can be placed in an album if people wish, and returned at the end of the group.

During circle times it can be helpful to use a smooth stone, feather or stick to circulate. The person with the object is the speaker, and when they're finished speaking they pass the object on to the next person.

### **4. BREAK**

Allow about 10 – 15 minutes for a break and offer liquid refreshments. Pay particular attention to individuals who seem isolated or look uncomfortable.

### **5. Facilitator presentation/Discussion**

General information on ambiguous loss with discussion following

### **6. Homework assignment #1**

After the first session, one or more of the following activities can be helpful for participants as they prepare for the next gathering:

- 1) Have the family member(s) put together a collage of pictures to share with the group representing the life of the missing person from birth to the present time.
- 2) Begin a journal that reflects their support group experience. This is private unless the participant wants to share part of their journal with others.

### **7. Poem or other closure activity followed by social time (see Appendix #2 for suggestions)**

## Week Two



### Theme: Sharing Stories

#### 1. Sharing circle

Each person comments on their feelings and thoughts about the first session and how their week was in general. As each person takes their turn, they can show the picture of their missing person. These can be placed in an album for the duration of the group if you wish.

#### 2. Discussion and sharing of Week One home activity

#### 3. Telling the story of the disappearance

Each person has about ten minutes to share their narrative with the other participants and then pair off in twos to discuss. If time allows and your group is large, participants can move out of this dyad into another. Have twosomes who are strangers, if possible, to encourage a feeling of safety among all members of the group.

#### 4. Break

As in Week One

**5. Continuation of storie and reactions to the narrative**

Complete the narratives and then have participants share their responses to the stories of others and talk about how they felt as listeners.

**6. Homework assignment #2**

Have participants find a selection of music that reminds them of their person or provides comfort to them and share it with the other participants at Session Three.

**7. Poem or other closing activity** followed by social time (see Appendix for suggestions).

## Week 3



### **Theme: Living with Uncertainty**

#### **1. Sharing circle**

Each person comments on their feelings about the second session and how their week was in general

#### **2. Discussion and sharing of Week Two home activity**

#### **3. Facilitator presentation/Discussion**

Resiliency & Self-Esteem Building

#### **4. BREAK**

**5. Participants share how they're coping with the disappearance and whether others in the family have different strategies.** This discussion may include how these approaches have changed over time.

#### **6. Homework assignment #3**

1) Choose an art medium, such as clay or paint to express their feelings and share the finished product either through a picture of their work or the real thing. If attendees prefer not to share, they might instead talk about what it was like to use art as a form of self-help therapy.

2) Write a poem about the missing person or the experience of living without knowing what's happened. Where participants have a strong oral tradition, but may have limited writing skills, they can share a quote or story that gives them strength during difficult times. This activity draws on the cultural aspects of the participants and builds group cohesion by letting each member know that he or she has something to offer and to share (*Washington Coalition: Self-Esteem and Self-Awareness Activities for Support Groups*)

**7. Poem or other closing activity followed by social time (see Appendix for suggestions.)**

## Week 4



*I sing my sorrow, and I paint my joy. Joni Mitchell*

### **Theme: Coping Strategies**

#### **1. Sharing circle**

Each person comments on their feelings about the third session and how their week was in general

#### **2. Discussion and sharing of Week Three home activity**

#### **3. Stress Relief**

Facilitator presentation on stress and its effect on the body, including ways to reduce its impact

#### **4. BREAK**



#### **5. Guest to teach relaxation/meditation**

Simple relaxation techniques and meditation exercises are taught and practiced. If a guest is unavailable, the facilitator may be equipped to lead this activity.

#### **6. Homework assignment #4**

- 1) Facilitator explains how working on mandalas can help with relaxation and are given one to use or as an example.
- 2) Help one other family member or friend increase their coping skills through teaching him or her one activity from tonight's meeting

#### **7. Poem or other closure activity followed by social time (see Appendix for suggestions)**

## Week 5



### **Theme: Sharing Resources**

#### **1 Sharing circle**

Each person comments on their feelings about the fourth session and how their week was in general

#### **2. Discussion and sharing of Week Four home activity**

#### **3. Facilitator presentation/Discussion**

Presentation on trauma and resources to help

#### **4. BREAK**

## 5. What helps and doesn't help

Introduce the group to resources in their community or on-line, that may be helpful.

## 6. Plan for week six

Decide on pot luck or restaurant for the final group

## 7. Homework assignment #5

### 1) Personal Loss Timeline

Participants draw a line from birth to the present day on a sheet of paper and mark dates and ages when they experienced significant losses/trauma in their life. Have people look for patterns in their losses or traumatic events, especially related to their historical families.

Birth Present  
(date) \_\_\_\_\_ (today's date)

**2) Have participants write a letter to their missing person.** They may wish to use as a guide Ira Byock's "Four Things That Matter Most":

- I love you
- Please forgive me
- I forgive you
- Thank you

## 8. Poem or other closure activity followed by social time (see Appendix for suggestions)

## Week Six



**Theme: The Changing Face of Hope**

**(from 5:00 – 7:00 pm)**

### **1 Sharing circle**

Each person comments on their feelings about the fourth session and how their week was in general

### **2. Discussion and sharing of Week Five home activity**

Some participants may not wish to share their Personal Loss Time Line, but may be comfortable talking about some of the general themes they discovered when doing the exercise

### **3. Updates on their missing person by participants**

Each participant will indicate if they would like suggestions from the others on such matters as questions to ask their lead investigator, ideas for future searches and/or ways to work with the media

#### **4. The Changing Face of Hope**

Brief facilitator presentation followed by discussion

#### **5. BREAK**

#### **6. Moving Forward**

Either pot luck or private room at a local restaurant

Ideas on how everyone wants to continue the support, such as in person meetings on a regular basis, or possibly phone or email exchanges.

#### **7. Final Closure**

See suggestion for ending final session in Appendix

Have participants complete an evaluation of the six sessions (Appendix #4 )

## APPENDIX #1

### BEST PRACTICES FOR COUNSELLING FAMILIES OF THE MISSING

- 1. Counsellors will possess well-developed basic counselling skills recognizing the importance of empathy and genuineness, and treat all clients with courtesy, compassion and respect.**
- 2. Counsellors will have a detailed knowledge of the psychological and emotional experiences faced by families and friends of missing persons, and an awareness of the personal, legal and practical issues confronting their reality.**
- 3. Counsellors will have an understanding of the concept of continuous grieving faced by families and friends of missing persons, and will accept that closure is impossible.**
- 4. Counsellors will have an awareness of the different cultural and religious customs associated with the experience of grief and loss.**
- 5. Counsellors will understand the theory of ambiguous loss as developed by Dr. Pauline Boss.**
- 6. Counsellors will have a high tolerance for situations in which irresolvable issues remain.**
- 7. Counsellors will remain comfortable working collaboratively with families and friends of the missing for long stretches of time while continuing to bear witness to their pain.**

*Adapted from NSW Families and Friends of Missing Persons ([www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)) and Missing People, London England ([www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)) Closing Activities and Poems*

## APPENDIX #2

### Closing Activities/Poems

#### **1. Dark/Light (adapted from Chesbrough|[http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/reflection\\_manual/](http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/reflection_manual/) )**

Have participants sit in a circle with lit candles. The facilitator shares a dark part (or feeling) of (about) the experience of living with missing and blows out his/her candle. The next person shares until the room is dark. The facilitator lights his/her candle and shares a happy thought about the experience of coming together as part of this group, lights the candle of the person sitting next with their candle. Slowly the room becomes light.

#### **2. The Rose**

Participants are given a rose and each one removes the thorns and tells the group something they're going to try and change as it is not helping them move forward with their life.

#### **3. One Thing I'm Grateful For Today**

Have everyone in turn say one thing they're grateful for on this day.

#### **4. Session Six - Building Positive Feelings**

At the beginning of the last session each person is given the name of someone in the group on a piece of paper. They then must think of a positive quality they admire in that individual over the course of the session. This is then shared with the person in closing. If the group is small, people can have everyone's name on a separate small sheet of paper and put an attribute for each individual.

Have program participants sit in a circle. Each person in the circle will tell each individual what s/he will take from that person and bring with him or her into the future, and then continue on around the circle until they finish. Then someone else in the circle starts.

## POEMS

### Walk On

You walk on  
Still beside me,  
Eyes shadowed in dusk;  
You're the  
Lingering question  
At each day's end.  
I have to laugh  
At how  
Open-ended you remain –  
Still with me  
After all these years  
Of being lost.  
I carry you like  
My own personal  
Time Machine,  
As I put on  
My lipstick, smile,  
And head out to  
The party.

*Donna Carnes*



## MISSING

Our oldest Brother left one day  
and never has returned,  
and after all this time our family's  
getting quite concerned.

Until several months went by  
we never worried very much,  
'cause he was always on the go  
and never kept in touch.

But then one day out of the blue  
he'd wonder back around,  
'cause someone in our family's  
always lived in our hometown.

But now he's only been seen  
once in forty years or so,  
and what has happened to him  
we'd really like to know.

We're afraid he might be buried  
in a grave somewhere unknown,  
and if that's the case we'll never  
get to bring our Brother home.

So our sympathy goes out to everyone  
who's in our place,  
with loved ones that are missing  
from their lives without a trace;

And we know how hard it is to keep  
those bad thoughts all concealed,  
when the whereabouts of your loved one  
might never be revealed.

*by Patricia Capansky from Anita [www.anitapoems.com/missing-person-poem.html](http://www.anitapoems.com/missing-person-poem.html)*

## Density (Petition to Establish Death)

The law is crisp while

Missing Person Land is shadow,

Full of foggy data

You can't see through,

Just like the sea.

I'd rather fall

Through airy sky

And be seen,

Than into the sea

Of lingering loss.

*Donna Carnes*

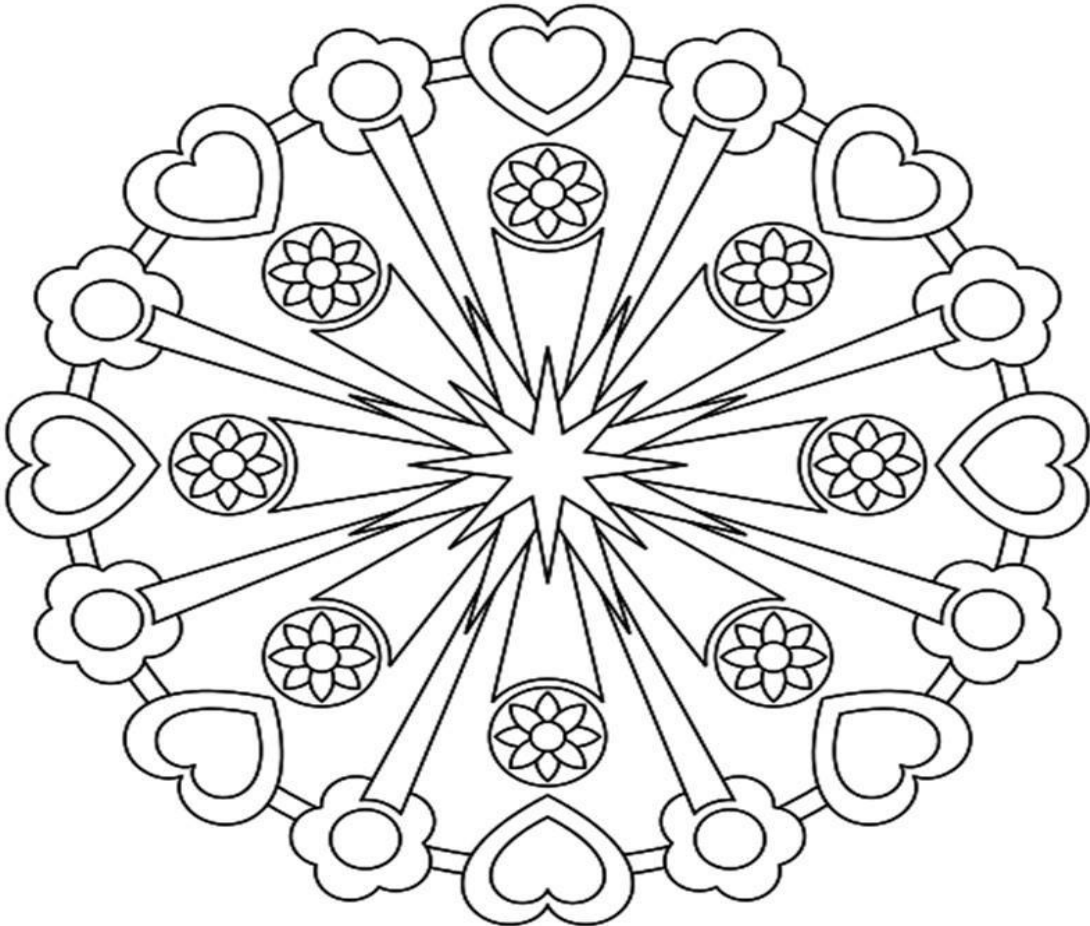
## Appendix # 3

### MANDALAS

“The word "mandala" is from the classical Indian language of Sanskrit. Loosely translated to mean "circle," a mandala is far more than a simple shape. It represents wholeness, and can be seen as a model for the organizational structure of life itself--a cosmic diagram that reminds us of our relation to the infinite, the world that extends both beyond and within our bodies and minds.

Describing both material and non-material realities, the mandala appears in all aspects of life: the celestial circles we call earth, sun, and moon, as well as conceptual circles of friends, family, and community.” *(from What is a Mandala? <http://www.mandalaproject.org/What/Index.html>)*

There are many free mandalas available on-line, such as the one below, that you can reproduce



## APPENDIX #4

### EVALUATION FORM

1. Date: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Name of facilitator(s):

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3. I am

\_\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_\_ Female

\_\_\_\_ Caucasian

\_\_\_\_ Indigenous/Aboriginal

\_\_\_\_ Other (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many of the 6 sessions did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Age:

\_\_\_\_ Under 20    \_\_\_\_ 21 – 34    \_\_\_\_ 35 – 49    \_\_\_\_ 50 – 64    \_\_\_\_ 65 or over

6. What was the most helpful part of this six week's support group?

7. What would you like to see changed to make the support group better?

8. Please tell us your thoughts on the facilitators who lead your group

9. Please add anything else you'd like us to know (use back of this sheet if needed)

