

ACCOMPANYING THE FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

THE MISSING
end the silence



ICRC



ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross
19, avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
T +41 22 734 60 01 F +41 22 733 20 57
E-mail: shop@icrc.org www.icrc.org
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FOREWORD

The families of missing persons live in constant anguish and despair, often waiting years for news about their loved ones. No matter how much time has passed, they find it difficult to accept, until reliable proof is provided, that their relative may no longer be alive. The uncertainty in which they have to live is the source of much suffering: it leads to emotional exhaustion and leaves lasting wounds. Not knowing what happened to a parent, spouse or child and not being able to give them a dignified burial, or to mourn their passing at a gravesite, places an intolerable burden on these families.

In accordance with the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has a permanent mandate to assist and protect victims of conflict and other situations of violence. International humanitarian law stipulates that the right of the families to know the fate of their missing loved ones must be respected and upheld. The prime responsibility for preventing disappearances and ascertaining the fate of missing persons lies with States. They must do everything in their power to provide information on all missing persons to their families.

Since 1991, the ICRC has played an active role in supporting the families of missing persons and advocating respect for their right to know the fate of their missing relatives. During the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, families filed over 34,000 tracing requests with the ICRC, hoping to learn what became of their loved ones and to recover their remains.

In 2000, in an effort to help the families of the Missing deal with their anguish and the resulting psychological and social consequences, the ICRC launched a support programme in Bosnia-Herzegovina involving extensive consultation and cooperation with psychologists, family associations and individual families. Further projects providing holistic and wide-ranging assistance to the families of the Missing soon developed in Serbia and Kosovo. Since 2008, the ICRC has developed similar projects in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, East Timor and elsewhere. This handbook before you brings together the experience and knowledge gained through these processes. It is designed as a guide for all those helping families cope with the disappearance of a loved one.

Accompanying the Families of Missing Persons: A Practical Handbook aims to serve all those having to endure the anguish caused by the disappearance of a loved one. The courage, persistence and dignity of these families, as they struggle to ascertain the fate of their loved ones and ease their own suffering, commands our admiration and respect. They deserve all the support of their communities and of the wider public. This handbook is dedicated primarily to them.

Pascal Hundt
Head, Assistance Division

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives

When a family member goes missing during an armed conflict or other situation of violence, it causes significant distress for all his or her relatives. Accompanying them in their search for the missing person, and helping them to cope with the various difficulties their situation presents, is vitally important. Today, a number of individuals from various educational and cultural backgrounds are involved in providing such support. This is a particularly challenging task because it often requires action on many levels.

The main objective of this handbook is to bolster the role of 'accompaniers' – the people who undertake such support (see Section 3) – by providing them with the following:

- An overview and understanding of the specific issues that the families of missing persons (the Missing) face
- A description of accompaniment as an alternative approach – for non-mental-health specialists and/or legal experts – to supporting families with missing relatives in their long search and to promoting their psychological well-being
- Practical tools and recommendations based on the real needs of the families

The handbook is based mainly on the experiences, in various contexts, of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and others involved in supporting families whose relatives have gone missing as a consequence of armed conflict or of violence in some other form. It is not intended to be exhaustive; it cannot be exhaustive, as it is based almost entirely on our experience so far. Additional material will be incorporated as it becomes available.

Target audience

All individuals or group of individuals – associations of various kinds, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, governmental actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, ICRC delegates, etc. – wishing to accompany (see Section 3) families whose relatives have gone missing as a consequence of armed conflict or some other situation of violence will find the handbook useful. Although it emphasizes community-based accompaniment of families, it is also likely to be of use to professionals of various kinds (psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, etc.) wishing to take a broader view of families' needs and create a comprehensive framework of support.

Given the broad range of activities needed to assist the families, the handbook can also be used by members of the community who have, in one way or another, to deal with issues arising from the disappearance of people from their midst.

Cultural issues

The handbook attempts to include as many instances as possible of the different ways in which families in various contexts deal with the disappearance of their relatives. It does not, however, claim to be exhaustive. It provides certain basic features that can be adapted or extrapolated as needed.

Using the handbook

The handbook is divided into five sections covering a broad range of essential activities in support of the families of the Missing (one of these, Section 5, is specifically for users of the handbook):

1. General information
2. Relatives of missing persons
3. Accompanying families
4. Accompanying families during the recovery and identification of human remains
5. Dealing with work-related stress

The five sections of the handbook also include the following:

- **Case boxes**, which contain illustrative stories of families
- **Example boxes**, which contain descriptions of perceptions and the way things are done in different parts of the world, drawn mainly from the ICRC's experiences in the field
- **Information boxes**, which contain specific information about subjects mentioned in the text, above or below the boxes
- **Information sheets**, which are there to add to, or summarize, the information contained in the main body of the text
- **Action sheets**, which contain recommendations on carrying out specific activities

Contents of each section

1. General information

Various types of disappearance are defined. Basic information about the rights of the Missing and of their families – under international humanitarian law and other bodies of law – is provided. The section also describes the various search mechanisms that should be available to families wishing to obtain information about their missing relatives.

2. Relatives of missing persons

This section describes the various difficulties, arising from the disappearance of their relatives, that families face. These difficulties are divided into categories – legal and administrative, economic and financial, psychological and psychosocial – that make up the main areas of activity for people involved in assisting the families.

3. Accompanying families

This section is addressed to those who need guidance in assessing the current situation of families and designing projects accordingly. It suggests simple ways of responding to the needs identified through a broad range of activities.

The emphasis is on accompaniment, an approach that combines specific activities with more general forms of community-based action. Specific tools (action sheets, information sheets) for bolstering the capacities of those involved in accompaniment are provided: these set out activities for helping families to cope with their situation.

4. Accompanying families during the recovery and identification of human remains

During the recovery and identification of human remains, family members may be forced, by various circumstances, to come to grips with their loss. Because of the intensity of these situations, families require specific attention during each step of the process, something that accompaniers must take into account. The section contains suggestions and practical tools to help accompaniers in this regard.

5. Dealing with work-related stress

Accompanying the families of the Missing can be challenging. It is important that accompaniers acknowledge their own needs as well as their limitations. This section describes ways to recognize work-related stress and to deal with it.

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

Introduction

Throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of people have lost track of a relative during an armed conflict or in a situation of violence. Their relatives may have been killed in mass executions and their bodies thrown into unmarked graves; they may have been captured or abducted, or arrested at their homes, and then died in custody; or they may be in secret locations, held incommunicado. They may be civilians fleeing the fighting or children separated from their families; or soldiers killed in combat whose remains have not been tended to properly.

The plight of persons who disappear is tragic. So, too, is that of their families: living in limbo, unable to mourn, and in the absence of definite knowledge, constantly tormented by hope – a secret prison, a new life in a foreign land, anything but the finality of death. Many spend years, and their life savings, searching fruitlessly for their relatives. Besides the emotional suffering, this can be financially crippling. It is often the case that it is the breadwinner who has gone missing, leaving wives and mothers impoverished and in need. In administrative terms, the situation can be something of a nightmare. In some countries, families have to wait for years before their missing relative is officially declared dead or absent. This interval can seem an eternity for family members, whose lives stand still, so to speak: they are unable to sell property, remarry, or even go through funeral rites.

Numerous provisions of international law have been developed to help avert cases of disappearance and to support families when relatives of theirs do go missing. Responsibility for enacting and implementing these laws rests mainly with the pertinent authorities. The objective of this chapter is to describe, broadly, the legal framework governing the Missing and their families.

The Missing

The Missing are *all those whose whereabouts are unknown to their families or, based on reliable information, who are reported missing* as a consequence of armed conflict, internal violence or internal disturbances. This is an issue in a significant number of contexts. The principal categories of missing person are listed below. These categories are not watertight: in some instances, they overlap.

- ➔ The dead: in numerous instances, people are unaccounted for because they have been killed and their bodies left unattended, buried in haste, or burnt (or disposed of by some other means).
- ➔ Members of armed forces or armed groups whose fate is unknown: combatants who are said to be “missing in action” (MIA) are those who failed to return from a military operation and whose fate is unknown. They may be dead; or they may have been captured. The MIA are usually weapon bearers who have been killed but whose families have not received confirmation of their fate. During conflicts, often no effort is made to determine the identity of the dead and bodies are disposed of without the families being informed.
- ➔ Displaced persons, refugees, isolated populations (for example, people living under occupation who are not able to send news to their next-of-kin): in such cases, families can remain without news of their relatives for a long time, not knowing, for instance, if they are alive or dead.
- ➔ Children separated from their families during flight or as a result of their forced recruitment into armed forces or armed groups: it is not unusual to find children on their own, as a result of having been separated from their families while fleeing fighting, or because they were forcibly recruited, incarcerated or even hastily adopted.
- ➔ People captured, arrested or abducted, whose families are unaware of their fate: in this case, also classified as forced disappearance, the person in question is arrested or abducted by agents of the State, or of non-State actors, and never seen again. The missing person may be held incommunicado and/or in a secret location, disappear, or die in custody. In many cases, the families either do not know their relatives’ whereabouts or do know but are not permitted to visit or correspond with them.
- ➔ Mentally ill people whose families are unaware of their fate: it may be that the missing persons are being held in mental institutions and without access to means of communication (owing to their own mental state).

INFORMATION: Forced disappearance

Forced disappearance, also known as “enforced disappearance,” was criminalized in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006) and was included in the Rome Statute as a crime against humanity: “Enforced disappearance of persons’ means the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law for a prolonged period of time.”
(Rome Statute, 1998: Article 7 (2)(i))

People affected by the disappearance

1. The families of the Missing

Those who go missing are indeed victims, but so are the families they leave behind. The disappearance of a relative has a profound emotional impact on family members and often significantly affects their daily lives. This will be the subject of detailed discussion in the sections that follow.

Uncertainty about the whereabouts or fate of a missing relative can have an effect, more or less direct, on all members of the family unit.

In the contexts in question, families commonly include:

- children born in or out of wedlock, adopted children and stepchildren;
- spouses and *de facto* spouses;
- parents (including stepmothers, stepfathers, and adoptive parents);
- full or half or adopted siblings.

In many socio-cultural contexts, families are defined more inclusively: people who live under the same roof as the members of a family or have close relationships with them would be considered members of that family.

The families' response

It is the families of the Missing who have to give meaning to the disappearance. They are the ones who live with the absence, as it were, and who must deal with its consequences.

In cases of disappearance, a major obstacle might be acknowledging that their relatives are no longer with them, that they have vanished. Their initial reaction, which is understandable, might be to believe that the missing relative has been hidden somewhere and, especially in the context of armed conflict or political violence, that he or she is being held in detention; in other words, that their relative is still alive.

“How could he have disappeared? He must be somewhere! They must have taken him!”

Declarations like this, which are not uncommon, show how difficult it often is for families to accept the brute fact of disappearance; they are more likely to entertain the possibility of detention, a more hopeful and satisfactory explanation.

Over time, the disappearance becomes a fact, impossible to deny. This happens usually after people who were actually detained return, or when no trace of the missing relative can be found. At that point, the belief that the missing relative is hidden somewhere may give way to the struggle to keep the memory of his or her existence alive, to preserve the fact of his or her having once existed.

2. The community of belonging

Because missing persons are part of a community (ethnic, religious, political, etc.), their disappearance will have an impact on their groups of belonging, particularly when disappearance is used, by those responsible for it, as a tactic against certain groups of people.

It is a widely held view that disappearance can be one of the consequences of a politically motivated wish to do away with members of an opposition group – by assaulting their values and their identity. In such instances, the aim is not only to terrorize a community in order to quell opposition or dissent, but also to target the honour and the beliefs of the families in question and of their groups of belonging. In some contexts, corpses and human remains have been intentionally desecrated. Preventing families from being able to carry out funeral rites, by burning bodies or burying them in secret places, is another way of traumatizing a group or a community and erasing all traces of the existence of those who have disappeared.

EXAMPLE

In South America, during periods of military dictatorship, or in Algeria during the years of repression by the French military, getting rid of dead bodies was one way to conceal the fact of violence. Many corpses were burnt or flown out to sea by helicopters and dumped.

When missing persons were buried somewhere, their only memorial was a piece of wood with two letters carved on it: "NN" (No Name).

Paraphrased from Frédéric Baillette, "Stratégies de la cruaute," *Quasimodo* No. 9, Montpellier, 2006.

When someone's existence is blotted out in this way, it will seriously impede the process of grieving for him or her. It is yet another reason why the memory of the Missing has to be preserved in some form.

Rights and responsibilities

Under international law, persons missing in conflict or during internal violence have various rights:

- **Fundamental rights that have to be respected by everyone and in all circumstances**
- **The rights of persons arrested or in detention, and their relatives**
- **The rights of the Missing**
- **The rights of the relatives of the Missing**

The authorities are responsible for respecting, enacting, and implementing the laws that protect these rights.

These rights are to be found in various bodies of law that complement one another and are to be applied both during war and in times of peace.

INFORMATION: Main texts

- Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field of 12 August 1949
- Geneva Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea of 12 August 1949
- Geneva Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949
- Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
- Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) of 8 June 1977
- Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II) of 8 June 1977
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998)
- International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006)
- United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (1992)

- **International humanitarian law**, also known as the law of armed conflict, defines the conduct and responsibilities of parties engaged in armed conflict, in relation to each other and to specific categories of person, including the Missing.
- **International human rights law** codifies legal provisions governing human rights in various international human rights instruments; States are bound by it.
- **International criminal law** deals with international crimes and with the courts and tribunals that are set up to adjudicate cases in which *individuals* have incurred international criminal responsibility.
- **Domestic law** is the law in force in a given country. This law should reflect the exigencies of international law to which the State is bound.¹
- The principles of **customary international law** – i.e. unwritten binding international law – also address the matter of protecting and respecting the rights of the Missing and of their families. These underlie or complement the provisions adopted in international treaties.

1. Fundamental rights

In order to prevent the disappearance of persons, and to establish the whereabouts of those who are unaccounted for, measures should be taken to implement the following fundamental rights:

- The right not to be arbitrarily deprived of one's life
- The right to be protected against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment
- The right to liberty and security, and the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of liberty, including the fundamental and judicial procedural guarantees that must be afforded to all persons deprived of liberty
- The right to a fair trial, which is guaranteed by the requirement to respect all judicial guarantees
- The right to know the fate of relatives, which is linked to the right to respect for family life
- The right to know the reason for one's incarceration, and to exchange news with relatives or other persons in a close relationship by any means of communication available
- The right not to be subjected to forced or involuntary disappearance and/or illegal or arbitrary abductions
- The right to be recognized as a person before the law

2. Fundamental rights of persons arrested or in detention

- To be registered by competent authorities
- To be informed of the reasons for their arrest or detention
- To have a fair trial at a court of law
- To inform their families or legal counsel of their arrest, place of detention and state of health
- Individuals who have been arrested, detained or imprisoned must be registered by competent authorities in accordance with the provisions of the law.
- Persons deprived of their liberty must be informed – when they are arrested – of the reasons for their arrest or detention and promptly informed of any charges against them.
- Persons deprived of their liberty are entitled to take proceedings before a court that can decide without delay on the lawfulness of such deprivation, and order their release if it finds such deprivation to be unlawful.
- Persons deprived of their liberty have the right to inform any person with a legitimate interest, such as their families or legal counsel, as a minimum, of their capture or arrest, the location of the place where they are detained and their state of health. They are authorized to communicate with and receive visits from their families.

3. The rights of the Missing

- To recognition in the form of a specific legal status
- To be searched for and, when necessary, their bodies to be recovered: State authorities must conduct the necessary investigations
- Not to be declared dead without sufficient evidence and to be recognized instead as disappeared / absent by the competent administrative authorities
- To recover all one's rights and legal status when one's fate has been established
- The rights and interests of missing persons must be protected at all times until their fate has been ascertained. To this end, they must be granted a special legal status.

¹ The ICRC has prepared a set of guiding principles and a proposal for a model law on missing persons, to serve as tools to help States and their competent authorities to adopt or complete legislation on missing persons. See *Missing Persons: A Handbook for Parliamentarians*, ICRC/IPU, Geneva, 2009.

- ➔ The foremost right of a missing person is that to search and recovery. Within his or her right to life and security, a missing person has the right to have a thorough investigation conducted into the circumstances of his or her disappearance until a satisfactory conclusion can be drawn about it.
- ➔ When someone's fate has yet to be ascertained, his or her legal status of absence should be acknowledged and a certificate of absence granted by the competent administrative authority, attesting to this uncertainty and allowing for the protection of his or her rights. Granting the Missing a special legal status enables domestic law to respond to their legal needs, and to the uncertainties and hardships their families face. This status provides a framework and appropriate remedies to deal with the practical issues that arise every day.

 See Section 1, Information Sheet 1.1: Model Certificate of Absence, p. 26.

- ➔ A person should not be declared dead without sufficient supporting evidence. It is therefore desirable, before a death certificate is issued, to provide for an interim period of 'absence' of reasonable length, so that the circumstances of that person's disappearance can be investigated and his or her fate ascertained. If the person is found alive, the certificate of absence should be annulled and his or her legal status fully restored.

 See Section 1, Information Sheet 1.2: Model Certificate of Death, p. 27.

- ➔ If needed, a representative should be appointed to safeguard the interests of the missing person.
- ➔ Missing persons returning after a prolonged period of absence should also be entitled to assistance for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society, in addition to direct financial support.

4. The rights of the relatives of the Missing

- To know or to receive information about the fate and the whereabouts of the missing person
- To have his or her legal status legally protected
- To request and receive basic social and/or material support from the competent authorities

The right to know

- ➔ Everyone has the right to know the fate of his or her missing relatives, including their whereabouts or, if they are dead, the circumstances of their death and place of burial if known, and to receive their mortal remains.
- ➔ International humanitarian law imposes an obligation on each party to armed conflict to take the necessary measures to clarify the fate of missing persons and to inform their families. This obligation can be met, in part, by investigating cases of disappearance that occurred on the territory under their control and keeping relatives informed of the progress and results of their inquiries.
- ➔ No penal responsibility should be imposed on relatives for seeking information regarding the fate of a relative, nor for maintaining contact once the fate of that person has been determined.
- ➔ As time passes, the reappearance of missing persons will grow more unlikely. Even as they continue to respect the obligation to provide information on the fate of the Missing, the authorities are likely to refocus their attention, shifting it to the exhumation of gravesites, the identification and return of human remains, and the provision of support to families as they conduct funerals and other ceremonies.

The legal status of the Missing

- ➔ Granting a missing person a formal legal status is essential. A certificate of absence should be issued at the request of relatives, other interested persons or the competent authority, if it has been established that a person has been missing for a determined period of time.
- ➔ A representative should be appointed to protect the interests and see to the immediate legal needs of the missing person and those of his or her family. The certificate of absence would entitle the representative to preserve the missing person's rights and manage his or her property and assets. When no public assistance is available for the family, an allowance, drawn from the assets of the missing person, might be arranged. A declaration of absence should enable the heirs to take provisional possession of the missing person's estate, as a declaration of death would. In the event of a missing person's reappearance, depending on the circumstances, provision should be made for compensation/reparation, restitution, assistance and social care.
- ➔ The civil status of the spouse of a person declared missing must not be altered before the absence or death of the missing person has been legally recognized.

Financial assistance and social benefits

- If the members of a missing person's family can prove their material dependence on that person's income, they should be entitled to submit a request to the authority of the competent court for an allowance drawn from the assets of the missing person, which would enable them to meet their immediate needs.
- The competent authority must assess and acknowledge the specific financial and social needs of missing persons and their families.
- Basic social services and financial assistance must be made available to the dependants of missing persons. This may include: an allowance for basic material needs; housing benefits and employment opportunities; health care; an education allowance for the children; and legal assistance. When there is a system of social security, the families of the Missing should have access to it.
- There are no grounds for discrimination with regard to the dependants of missing persons: for instance, whether the missing relative was a service person or a civilian, male or female, is immaterial; as are all such distinctions.
- If compensation programmes for victims of the conflict or situation of violence exist, missing persons' families should be entitled to the same benefits as all other victims.
- The interests of children should receive particular attention, as there may be neither another parent nor a care-giver to replace the person who has been declared missing.

5. Responsibilities of the authorities

Government authorities have an obligation to respect and implement these fundamental rules, and to incorporate them in their domestic legal system. All authorities are required by law to: a) take all possible steps to ensure that everyone respects the rules, in order to prevent people from going missing, and b) to respond to the needs of the families. This is essential. Whenever possible, there should be constructive dialogue between all parties, including the families of missing persons and their communities.

The pertinent State authorities should cooperate with national and international humanitarian and human rights organizations, particularly the ICRC and National Societies, with a view to tracing the missing persons and protecting the rights of their families.

INFORMATION

All authorities should take every measure necessary to:

- prevent the disappearance of people during an armed conflict or a situation of violence (by respecting and protecting civilians, as well as sick, wounded and captured members of armed forces and armed groups);
- identify and account for people reported missing. Families must be informed of the fate, including the whereabouts, and, if they are dead, the cause of death, of relatives who are missing as a result of armed conflict or some other situation of armed violence. Families and communities must be informed of the events that led to the disappearance of their relatives, and the perpetrators of violations that resulted in the disappearance held accountable;
- support the families of missing persons according to their needs.

The authorities must be able to:

- receive requests from family members, dependants or legal representatives to trace missing persons and use mandated institutions or agencies to collect and process all the information available;
- investigate the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a missing person, using a wide range of means to ascertain his or her fate;
- reply to applicants as soon as the information they requested is available.

Searching for missing persons

1. Registering and submitting a request for tracing a missing person

- Authorities should make sure that any person with a legitimate interest is able to register a missing person. This includes family members and dependants, as well as legal representatives of the missing person or the family. It may also include other persons who are able to demonstrate a legitimate interest, such as friends and neighbours, or any person who has reliable information that a person is missing.
- This should be possible as soon as there are concerns about the missing person.
- To facilitate this, the authorities may wish to put certain local institutions (police or others) in charge of receiving tracing requests. The ICRC and National Societies also collect tracing requests from the families of missing persons. The registration of a tracing request implies a commitment to do everything possible to find answers and to inform the family.

 See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.4: Restoring Family Links and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, p. 89.

- It is important to ensure that information, on the missing person and about the circumstances of his or her disappearance, is recorded in sufficient detail precisely when that person is reported missing and being registered, because important details may be forgotten with the passage of time. In addition to basic information – name, age and gender, for instance – it is essential to record the clothes worn at last sighting, the place of last sighting, the reasons why the person is thought to be missing, the circumstances of disappearance, and personal information about family members and the person making the report.
- The safety of the persons providing the information, and of the persons mentioned in that information, is of primary importance. While the information should be shared amongst the appropriate authorities, it should be protected once provided, and no data should be used or published that may cause harm to individuals.
- The information about missing persons should be deposited in a centralized institution, so that it can: provide a reliable overview of the scope of the problem, be of help in locating missing persons, and serve as a source of reference for other authorities, who may be better placed to search for missing persons than the local reporting authority.
- Procedures on where and how to report missing persons should be widely known and made accessible.

2. Tracing missing persons

Parties to a conflict have a duty to clarify the fate and the whereabouts of missing persons – and, therefore, the corresponding obligation to conduct effective investigations. Cooperation amongst the pertinent public agencies is essential. Much of the information related to tracing and identifying missing persons will come from various government agencies and ministries, at the national or the local level. All the pertinent institutions and ministries must, therefore, be unambiguously committed to collecting and processing information concerning missing persons, and must actively support these activities.

- States must take, at the national level, the measures necessary to trace missing persons and to serve and assist their families. One way to do this is to establish an independent State authority that will be responsible for tracing missing persons and identifying human remains.
- For instance, during armed conflicts, authorities should be encouraged to set up National Information Bureaus (NIBs) to centralize information on all persons unaccounted for, without discriminating among them, and to take into account the needs of their families. After the end of the conflict, such NIBs could be asked to continue their work on the Missing, because they would already have a great deal of relevant information. Government bodies dealing with such issues might already be in existence: presidential commissions of enquiry, commissions on missing persons, truth commissions, human rights commissions, ombudsmen, and so on. Such institutions usually have a broad mandate to address human rights violations.
- When several (former) parties to a conflict are dealing with cases of missing persons, they should be encouraged to establish mechanisms ensuring coordination and information sharing, on issues such as exhumation, identification and transfer of human remains. Such mechanisms are usually set up in the period following the end (or the freezing) of a conflict; they might be provided for in formal efforts to settle the situation, such as cease-fire agreements and peace treaties.

- To make certain that they function effectively, these mechanisms should be given a clear mandate to deal with all the cases of missing persons, without discrimination. They should be transparent, independent and impartial, and should do their work in accordance with internationally recognized professional standards. They should coordinate with all the actors concerned, and the families must have easy access to them.
- Gathering information about the Missing is always a challenge. Various strategies may be adopted:
 - an information campaign: all those in possession of information on missing persons, on burial sites, or on events that may have led to disappearances, should be encouraged to disclose it or to pass it on;
 - publication of a list of missing persons;
 - publication of photographs of personal belongings found alongside human remains;
 - provision of access to telephones to encourage the passing on of information (anonymous information may be accepted so as not to link the person supplying it to criminal investigations);
 - offers of protection, or of other incentives or rewards, to people providing information;
 - acquiring access to State archives.
- All mechanisms should be concerned about the missing persons' families, as they are a valuable source of information; but, above all, because they, too, are victims in this situation. All mechanisms should inform the families of: their (the mechanisms') roles and responsibilities, what they are going to do, their time frame, and how they intend to use and follow up on the information collected. They should also inform families of the results of their investigations, of the likelihood of the missing person being found alive, and of the fact that if the person is dead, his or her body will be recovered, identified and returned to the families. It is essential, in the interests of the families, not to raise false hopes amongst them.
- Appropriate management of personal data should be ensured.

 See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.6: Basic rules of information management, p. 91.

Searching for, recovering and identifying the dead

Every party to an armed conflict must respect and treat the dead with dignity. Dead bodies must be disposed of in a respectful manner, and graves shown due respect and properly maintained.

The discovery of burial sites can be important not only in tracing missing persons, but also in establishing the commission of crimes and, afterwards, in prosecuting those responsible. Exhumations should be performed only with the proper authorization and in accordance with the applicable legal provisions.

All available means must be employed to identify human remains. The cause of death should be established with due diligence, and all available information should be recorded prior to the disposal of the remains. A public official or some other competent person, preferably a trained forensic specialist, must be designated to perform post-mortem examinations and to make the final determination about identity and cause of death. Commonly recognized international ethical standards of practice must be adhered to during this process.

Internationally recognized rules of conduct on the use of means of identification, particularly for investigations carried out in an international context, must be upheld and promoted and/or adopted by the competent authorities. The procedures for exhumation and post-mortem examination should respect the principles listed below.

- The dignity, honour, reputation and privacy of the deceased must be respected at all times.
- The religious beliefs and opinions of the deceased and his or her relatives – if this information is available – should be taken into consideration.
- Families should be kept informed of decisions about exhumation and post-mortem examination, and of the results of any such process. When circumstances permit, their presence or that of their representatives should be considered.
- After post-mortem examination and identification, the remains should be handed over to the family as soon as possible.
- Whenever exhumations are performed, it is essential that all information that may be of help in identification, be collected; regulations and procedures for collecting and processing information should be

in conformity with the principles governing the protection of personal data and genetic information. It is important to preserve evidence that may be conducive to identification and that may be required for any criminal investigation, under domestic or international law.

- ➔ Whenever possible, the dead should be buried, and in accordance with their religious practices.

Transitional justice and the Missing

Transitional justice is a response to systematic or widespread violations of human rights and humanitarian law. It places victims at the centre of the process and seeks recognition for them. Transitional justice includes a number of processes that aim to heal the wounds of the past and help societies to move towards peace and reconciliation by, *inter alia*:

- seeking the truth;
- providing reparations;
- establishing responsibility (including criminal).

When the guns finally fall silent, deeply fractured societies can call upon a broad range of mechanisms to help them address the past: this is known as transitional justice. Judicial and non-judicial mechanisms are complementary and have various aims. They place the victim at the heart of the process and help societies heal the wounds of the past and move towards peace and reconciliation by seeking the truth, establishing responsibility (including criminal), and offering reparation.

The families of the Missing should try to use transitional justice processes to seek answers about their loved ones' fate. In other words, concerns over the Missing should be raised within the wider context of transitional justice even though the latter covers much broader issues. Here, we will look at those aspects of transitional justice that are most relevant to the Missing and try to explain them as clearly as possible. The families of the Missing should then be in a position to decide whether they can act alone or whether they need support, including specialized assistance.

1. Seeking the truth

This derives from the "need to know." The aim is to establish the facts and help societies examine the violence of the past while studying the overall context in which abuses took place. The structure is less rigid than that of a trial and victims have a chance to tell their stories. They also have the opportunity to confront their torturers directly; the latter can acknowledge their participation in abuses, assume responsibility for them and apologize to the victims and their families.

The truth and reconciliation commission is a good example of a truth-seeking process. These official, temporary and non-judicial bodies are responsible for determining the facts and investigating all violations that have been committed over a specific period of time. At the end of the process, official reports are published with two objectives: to document a difficult period using the accounts of all those involved in a conflict, and to help draw up recommendations and corrective measures to ensure that the abuses never happen again.

When a truth and reconciliation commission or other similar body is established, the families of the Missing should first ensure that it has a broad enough mandate to cover the issue of missing persons; if it does not, they should lobby to make sure that it will. Second, they should check that the commission has all the powers necessary to conduct the necessary investigations, including the carrying out of exhumations. Third, they should make certain that they are able to appear before it and present their grievances.

The families of the Missing should not hesitate to request protection from the commission if they feel that they may be putting themselves at risk by taking part in the truth-seeking process.

For all these matters, the families should have access to specialized, particularly legal, assistance.

2. Reparations

It is generally accepted that where serious abuses have been committed, States have an obligation not only to prosecute those responsible but also to ensure that the victims receive reparation – if necessary, by organizing this themselves. By setting up reparation programmes, the public authorities confirm that these violations demand reparation.

Reparations within the context of transitional justice can have many meanings. They may take different forms, monetary or non-monetary, and may be granted on a collective or individual basis. The emphasis may be on restitution, i.e. a return to the *status quo ante* (as far as is possible): by being returned to one's home, by the restoration of one's liberty, job and personal effects, and so on. Failing this, appropriate compensation should be paid out. Reparations also include rehabilitation and reintegration, in addition to other, more symbolic acts – such as official apologies, assurances of non-repetition, memorials, memorial ceremonies and so forth – which are often more important to victims. In order to make the payment of reparations to victims a reality, national or international funds can – or rather should – support the action taken in this regard.

Entitlement to any kind of reparation as a victim of the disappearance of one or more relatives depends on recognition of this status, which must be sought in accordance with the relevant legislation or regulations.

3. Criminal repression

As the mainstay of justice when serious breaches of law have occurred, criminal repression is a key element of transitional justice. Effective repression helps to put an end to the abuses and prevent their happening again by making punishment certain and unavoidable. Criminal repression is a mechanism that generally gives victims a sense that justice has been done and can help increase the public's confidence in the State's ability and willingness to ensure respect for the law. It also conveys the message that certain kinds of misconduct, even though they took place in the past, are unacceptable and must be punished.

Families of the Missing can get involved at various stages of the criminal proceedings. For example, at the investigation stage they can contact the authorities to make sure that their concerns are fully taken into consideration. Therefore, if the authorities carry out exhumations, they must do so not only to gather the best evidence for prosecution but also to provide the families of the Missing with information.

At the trial stage, and when the judicial system permits, the families of the Missing should assert their right to initiate proceedings or to take part in them as *civil parties*. They thus ensure that their petitions will be considered. Even if the judicial system does not permit this, the families of the Missing should be encouraged to participate. Even as witnesses, they can bring their questions about the fate of their relatives to the attention of the judges.

For all these matters, the families should have access to specialized, in particular legal, assistance.

INFORMATION SHEET 1.1 Model Certificate of Absence***MODEL CERTIFICATE OF ABSENCE**

(title of responsible authority) CERTIFICATE OF ABSENCE

Reference number _____

Name and first names _____

Address _____

Citizenship _____ Gender _____

Place and date of birth _____

Occupation _____

Type and number a document _____

Father's name _____

Mother's name _____

Name of spouse _____

Dependants _____

Date and place of last sighting _____

Name of the reporting person _____

Address of the reporting person _____

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE MISSING PERSON

Authority _____

or

Name and first name _____ Type and number of a document _____

Citizenship _____

Address _____

Duration of the validity of the declaration of absence _____

(Date, seal and signature of the responsible authority)

* Reproduced from *Missing Persons: A Handbook for Parliamentarians*, ICRC/IPU, Geneva, 2009.

INFORMATION SHEET 1.2 Model Certificate of Death***MODEL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH**

(Title of the responsible authority) CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

Name and first names _____

Place and date of birth _____

Last address _____

Citizenship _____ Gender _____

Occupation _____

Type and number a document _____

Father's name _____

Mother's name _____

Name of spouse _____

Authority _____

* Reproduced from *Missing Persons: A Handbook for Parliamentarians*, ICRC/IPU, Geneva, 2009.

2. RELATIVES OF MISSING PERSONS



Tofiq Babayev/ICRC

Shamkir, Azerbaijan. Relatives of missing persons sharing memories.

Introduction

Being a missing person's relative is unlike any other experience in life. The relatives of missing persons exist in a state of limbo: vital questions related to the fate of their loved ones, and to their own social situation, will remain unanswered for a long time if nothing is done.

A missing person's relative has to wage a constant struggle, not only to find his or her loved one but also to stave off the possibility of that person disappearing completely. The persistent use of public demonstrations has enabled some families to obtain information about loved ones who are missing (e.g. in Argentina); but others who follow the same path have had to pay a very high price (mental, physical, financial and social) without knowing if or when their efforts will bear fruit.

Relatives of missing persons also have to endure adversity in many forms: **legal, administrative, economic, psychological and psychosocial**. The following section examines all the difficulties with which they might be required to cope.

Legal and administrative difficulties related to the disappearance of a family member

INFORMATION

In many countries, owing to gaps in legislation and administrative obstacles, families have no formal status whatsoever; because of that, they are also without any means of support. For instance, they have no access to social benefits and pensions and are prevented from exercising their rights under property and family law:

1. The absence of a formal or legal status for the Missing impedes the setting up of a legal framework to enable their families to deal with practical issues. This absence of legal status for missing persons can force their relatives to apply for a death certificate in order to qualify for social and/or material support.
2. The families of the Missing often have no access to basic, easily comprehended information regarding their rights and the administrative procedures for exercising them.
3. They may face administrative obstacles and may not be able to provide the required documents and evidence because of the expenses entailed, the exigencies of travel and other impediments.
4. They may be afraid or reluctant to report the cases that concern them and/or have no confidence in the process or in the authorities.
5. In some cases, traditional rules take precedence over domestic law.

1. Absence of legal status for missing persons

Ideally, the family of a missing person should be able, without delay, to report his or her disappearance to the designated authorities (police or others) and receive an official document attesting that they have done so.

This document, often called a “**certificate of absence**” is considered proof of absence and used to process administrative and pension claims, in accordance with existing law and procedures. In particular, it entitles the missing person’s representatives to preserve his or her rights and to manage property and assets in his or her interest. For instance, financial assistance for dependants might be arranged when no public assistance is available – in the form of an allowance drawn from the assets of the missing person. A certificate of absence would also enable the missing person’s heirs to take provisional possession of his or her estate, with certain restrictions. In many countries, depending on domestic law, victims of a conflict are entitled to apply for compensation as well as to obtain other benefits (pensions, land, housing, scholarships, job opportunities, etc.).

A person should not be declared dead without sufficient evidence. It is therefore desirable to provide for a certain period of absence before a death certificate may be issued. The duration of this period of absence depends on domestic law and on existing procedures, which can be quite complex.

EXAMPLE: Russian Federation legislation on missing persons

- A person who has gone missing during a war is to be considered missing until the passage of two years after the cessation of military operations, and thereafter to be regarded as dead (Civil Code, Article 45, Para. 2).
- In circumstances other than those of war, anyone who has gone missing may be considered ‘missing for unknown reasons’ if no information on that person has been available for one year (Civil Code, Article 42). Five years must pass before this person is declared dead (Civil Code, Article 45, Para. 1), or only six months if the disappearance is judged to have occurred under “life-threatening circumstances.”

In many countries, death certificates for servicemen missing in action are routinely issued after a certain period (three months to one year) following the event that occasioned the disappearance. The issue is more complex for the families of missing civilians. Often, these families can apply for a death certificate only after proving that they have not heard from the missing person, or had any information regarding him or her, during the year immediately preceding their application. If the authorities are satisfied, they might decide to register the death of the missing person and subsequently provide a death certificate to the family.

EXAMPLE

In Sri Lanka, many families of missing persons requested a death certificate to be able to claim an inheritance and/or compensation. They had no option but to state that their missing relative had died. Understandably, this did not help the families to put an end to the issue. It may even have burdened them psychologically: they may have felt that they had betrayed their missing relative (ICRC Internal Report).

It is understandable that families should be unwilling to declare a missing relative dead in a court of law in order to take advantage of the assets and the rights to which they are entitled. They would prefer to forgo the entitlements rather than accept the process. In some cases, families refused to ask for a certificate of absence or death because it was vital for them to preserve the hope that their missing relative was *on his or her way back home*. Those who have declared their missing relative dead are reluctant to talk about it. When they do, they try to justify their decision. *"How can I proclaim my father dead? What gives me the right to do it? Who am I to decide how long my father lives and when his life is over? (...) I will beg but I will not do that,"* said the son of a civilian who disappeared in August 1995 (ICRC, Legal Study, 2004, p. 34).

⌚ See Section 1, Information Sheets 1.1 and 1.2:
Model Certificate of Absence and Model Certificate of Death, pp. 26–27.

⌚ See Section 3, Action Sheet 309:
Help families to tackle legal/administrative issues, p. 105.

2. Lack of information and insufficient understanding of existing laws and procedures

The families of missing persons are often unaware of the laws governing their rights and the benefits to which they are entitled, and of the administrative procedures or requirements that stand in their way. These procedures can be quite complex and subject to many interpretations. The very language of rights is often quite alien to the families and conveys little if any meaning. *"We hear people on the radio talking about these things, but nobody has come and told us about our rights. We don't know anything about human rights,"* says the sister-in-law of a missing person in Nepal (ICRC, 2008).

Women are often likely to be unfamiliar with the law and the administrative process because usually their husbands are in charge of such matters and it is their – the husbands' – names that appear on official documents.

3. Deficiencies in the application of the law

Moreover, the application of the laws and regulations can be chaotic for the following reasons:

- ➔ local administrative officers are not fully informed of the pertinent policies and procedural requirements;
- ➔ police stations might have neither the requisite ability nor the resources to register and investigate cases of missing persons;
- ➔ authorities are not always aware of the difficulties that families encounter as they grapple with legal and administrative issues and with the law itself. This lack of awareness might result in the uneven application of the law as well as in the taking of arbitrary decisions. The resources – human and financial – of competent authorities are often not adequate for dealing with the grievances of the families of the Missing.

Lack of confidence in the process or in the authorities

Families are often faced with civil servants and clerks who are inefficient or not properly informed, or who might be unsympathetic to their needs. There are other obstacles as well: the unwillingness of the local

authorities to apply the law, excessively bureaucratic and slow procedures, unreliable methods of registration and corruption.

It has been claimed by some families that their statements were not properly recorded, or that they had to sign, or put their thumbprints on, documents of whose contents they knew nothing.

4. Difficulties related to following required procedures

Administrative obstacles

Administrative obstacles can take the following forms:

- the requirement that applications must be made in person can be extremely difficult for the family to fulfil (the claimant is required to have a formal authorization from the missing person to act on his/her own behalf);
- requiring families to make their applications in the country/municipality where their missing relative was living might create difficulties sometimes: the families might have become refugees or displaced persons as a result of the conflict;
- the costs involved in obtaining documents (administrative fees and cost duties, travel expenses, visa requirements) are often prohibitive;
- the existence of deadlines for submitting claims means that the families bear the burden of respecting them.

Difficulties in providing required documents

Certain documents – birth/death/marriage certificates, documents confirming their ownership of property rights, vocational training certificates, attestations of employment, military service certificates – enable economically vulnerable families to benefit from specific rights to which they are entitled.

However, the families are very often not in a position to obtain these documents, either because they were destroyed during the conflict or owing to the inaccuracy of records and the inability of the local administration to provide the necessary information.

Families often find themselves in a position where documents bearing the name of their missing relative have to be reissued. In such instances, to prevent duplication and fraud, the authorities require the presence of the missing person and refuse to issue the documents to a member of the family without express authorization from the missing person. Families sometimes feel that this stipulation exists for no reason other than to put obstacles in their way.

The situation is even more complicated in areas of the world where the missing person does not possess official documents (identity cards, passports, etc.). In such situations, the family may have first to prove the existence of their missing relative before claiming his or her disappearance!

CASE

A family seeking to reclaim their property, in order to sell it, spoke of their struggles with the complex administrative requirements: "All this goes so slowly, and inefficiently. You need a bunch of documents for every single thing: people just keep referring you to others. When you decide to do something like that, you need a lot of energy, tenacity and patience. And it is exactly what you lack," said the daughter of a missing civilian who disappeared in 1994.

ICRC, *The Families of the Missing in Serbia and Montenegro: A Legal Study*, Geneva, 2004, p. 39.

5. Fear and threats

Families may be afraid to report the case of a missing relative to the pertinent authorities, including the police, for a number of reasons. The authorities themselves might be involved in that person's disappearance. The families might also be afraid of stigmatization, isolation, certain kinds of pressure, and even threats if they ask the authorities to take appropriate action.

Some families have reported that they were intimidated into making false statements to the local authorities, by the party responsible for their relative's disappearance.

Many families have complained that in order to obtain a death certificate, they were forced to sign documents stating that their relative was “killed by terrorists” and/or affirming that they had seen the body and were certain of the person’s death – even though none of these statements was true.

6. Domestic law and traditional practice

An additional burden for those related to a missing person must be noted: traditional ideas, or rules, often take precedence over domestic law in certain matters. Such rules are not always fully in line with domestic or even international law. Also, in many communities, the family unit and the clan still organize most aspects of daily life and individuals derive their identities from these groupings. In such communities, ideas of duty and tradition, which are very important, supersede formal law in certain areas.

EXAMPLE

Traditional marriage: Many people, especially in rural areas, have traditional marriages, which are conducted by a local religious leader and not registered with the administrative authorities. In such matters as inheritance, child custody or benefits associated with the loss of a husband, there is thus no effective legal protection for the wife of a missing person.

The daughter-in-law: After a wedding, the wife usually moves to her in-laws’ house. She has a number of obligations there – among them, tending to the house and looking after her husband’s parents and family. The relationship between daughter-in-law and parents-in-law is usually a good one; but when it is not, problems can arise, because her position within the family is very weak and her husband’s parents exercise a significant amount of influence. If a father is missing and the mother leaves the home, the children will have to remain in their father’s house. Traditionally, after a divorce the father is given custody of the children.

Some wives can face a number of problems, such as being denied access to social assistance (compensation for “the loss of a breadwinner”) or to their children if they wish to re-marry.

EXAMPLE

In cases of disappearance, Russian law stipulates that children must remain with their mother; but Russian tradition requires them to remain with their father’s parents. In consequence, the mother has, regardless of her own wishes, to stay in her parents-in-law’s household.

Regarding inheritance, houses are often considered male property. When, after a disappearance, there are no males left, a family can be faced with the prospect of losing its home, as neighbours are permitted to openly stake a claim to it.

Difficulties related to the search for a missing relative

INFORMATION

Families begin the search for a loved one the day they become aware of his or her disappearance, and do not stop until they receive credible information about that person's fate and whereabouts. This is, in most cases, a very long process with many obstacles along the way:

- absence of information from the authorities: even when there are indications that the person disappeared while under the responsibility of, for example, the police or the army, the authorities show little interest in clarifying his or her fate;
- unavailability of pertinent information on existing mechanisms for clarifying the fate of missing persons, or on organizations that might be able to assist families in their search;
- the difficulty of proving the death of a relative: in most instances, the body of the missing person is required to conclusively establish the fact of his or her death. In many contexts, however, no processes exist for the recovery, exhumation and identification of the remains of missing persons. And where they are available, these processes are very slow and do not provide the concrete answers that the families want;
- families might be exploited by irresponsible or unscrupulous persons who sell false information and spread rumours;
- families can be subjected to threats and reprisals during the search for their missing relative.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 308: *Helping in the search process*, p. 104.

1. The need for credible information on the fate of missing persons

Families seldom receive official notification of the disappearance of a relative. Family members might happen to witness the arrest of their loved one, when the authorities or "unknown armed men" come to their home and take him or her away. Occasionally, families first receive information about the disappearance of their relative from a witness or comrade; official confirmation, if it is forthcoming, takes place only afterwards. The possibility of their relative having disappeared takes shape as a result of the lack of news from or about him or her, and because he or she has not returned. In some instances, the family, not having had any news of fighting in which their relative might have been involved, start looking for that person. In many cases, though, families have to wait a very long time before receiving reliable information on the fate of their relative.

Most families **begin to search** for their relative as soon as that person has been arrested or they become aware of his or her disappearance. A period of active searching then follows. This includes visits to local authorities (formal and informal), to places of detention, to the battlefield, to hospitals, and to several organizations. It can also involve searching amongst dead bodies, uncovering graves, looking for possible witnesses or for people responsible for arresting the missing person or for those who were in charge of the military unit in which the missing person served; and, finally, families also approach people who can serve as intermediaries or assist in the search for information.

Most families will **continue to search** for their loved one until all avenues have been explored and until they receive **credible information on his or her fate and whereabouts**. Many families do not call off their search even many years after their relative's disappearance; they collect every piece of available information even if, sometimes, it contradicts that previously gathered. In their view, calling off the search would be equivalent to abandoning their missing relative; it would mean that they no longer considered that person part of the family. A few families do stop searching after a while. However, this does not mean that they have forgotten their loved one or that they have given up all hope of learning what became of him or her.

CASE

Leila is the mother of Magomed, an 18-year-old who was taken away by troops during a mass arrest of men in 2000. At the time, he was hiding in a basement with his mother and two sisters. Since then, Leila has been trying to contact all the domestic authorities, both federal and republican, and trying also to reach international authorities. Leila has a photograph that she thinks shows her son in a pit, of the same kind as the pits that were used at checkpoints. People were put into these pits and told to wait. The photograph is always with her, as is a copy of a letter she sent the authorities. Her daily life is wholly taken up with finding the authorities and giving them a copy of the photo and the letter, which recounts the events leading to her son's disappearance. It is a time-consuming process and leaves no room for anything else in Leila's life: she understands, of course, that she should take better care of herself and her two daughters. "There is too much to do to find Magomed," she says. "They (the authorities) should know where he is now." (Russia, ICRC, 2008)

2. Absence of information from the authorities on the fate of the Missing

Usually, when persons are abducted from their homes, their families go at once to law enforcement agencies, to local administrative authorities or to local military bases to enquire about their relatives' whereabouts. It is often the case that none of the officials approached by the families has any pertinent information to communicate; it is also claimed sometimes, by the families, that the officials falsely deny having any information. It is at this point that someone becomes a 'missing person.'

Usually, if the authorities have any information it is related to the very first hours, sometimes weeks, following the arrest of the person. Families then have to cope very quickly with the complete absence of information from the authorities, who claim that the missing person is no longer their responsibility. Families sometimes report being told that their missing relative had indeed been arrested, but was later released.

Nevertheless, families remain in contact with the authorities, in search of information regarding the whereabouts of their missing relatives, usually without success.

Even when the families produce substantial information (eyewitness accounts of the person's apprehension or detention), the authorities' responses often take the form of outright denial of the facts or of providing information that seems contradictory, given what the families already know. The dissatisfaction that families feel in such instances is understandable, as they are convinced that the authorities – having been involved in the disappearance of their relative – must know something about his or her whereabouts.

In the end, the families very quickly lose track of their missing relative's path through the official apparatus; but they continue to believe that he or she is being held somewhere within it.

3. The importance of recovering and identifying the remains of the Missing

The death of a missing person is often difficult to prove. Families need to be provided with every available detail of their loved one's fate: date, place, circumstances of death, and the location of his or her grave. In many contexts, and in many instances, families will be convinced of their loved one's death only after the recovery of his or her mortal remains. However, it is extremely important that they realize that the recovery and identification process, when it takes place, is lengthy and complex (*see Section 4, p. 124*). Moreover, remains often cannot be retrieved, and sometimes they cannot be identified.

CASE

"We need detailed information on what really happened to him. We want to know when and where he was killed so that we can perform our rituals. We also need the name of the police [sic] responsible for the incident. In any case, if he is no more, we want confirmation that he is dead. We should not be kept in doubt as to whether or not he will come back. They must show us where the corpse was buried; we need either the corpse or some sign that convinces us that he is dead" – Brother of missing man, Nepal, ICRC, 2008.

"It is really important to retrieve his body. We can't believe until they give us proof in some solid way. Who knows if they are showing you someone else's grave? We still don't believe people even though they say he was killed" – Mother of missing man, Nepal, ICRC, 2008.

4. The need for information about existing legal mechanisms or processes

for clarifying the fate of the Missing

Experience shows that in order to deal with the issue of missing persons, effective mechanisms must be established at various levels. Different contexts might require different solutions and no approach that fits every situation has yet been identified; even so, all of them – coordinating mechanisms and national mechanisms – should always liaise and inform the families and communities concerned about their work, its limitations, the chances of success and the probability of finding the missing persons alive or of finding the remains through exhumation and forensic identification. In addition, families should be informed about whether, and how, they might obtain assistance and reparation, and about the possibilities for punishing those responsible for the disappearance of their loved ones. Any direct participation by the families in these mechanisms, and in processes such as exhumation and sharing of information, should be dealt with in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner. The mechanisms must not perpetuate the families' suffering or give them false hope: this is one of their responsibilities.

Families have great hopes of these mechanisms; they expect, initially, to learn the truth, and to get redress and justice. Afterwards, however, most families express disappointment: they complain that they were not given the sort of concrete information they expected and that the inquiries had not uncovered the truth for which they had been hoping. The main reason for such disenchantment is that the authorities did not consult the families or their representatives.

5. Rumours, go-betweens and fortune tellers

The lack of clear information on the circumstances of someone's disappearance gives rise to rumour and conjecture. The role of the authorities in this regard is crucial. In some countries, official statements, that the missing person is being held in an unnamed place of detention and being forced to work, clearly do little more than feed the hopes of the missing person's family.

Almost all families conduct their own investigations in parallel with the steps mentioned above. In general, the information that families receive about their missing relative most commonly takes the form of rumours: secret places of detention or other locations, where prisoners have numbered identities or false names, are forced to work as slaves or to fight, and so on. Such rumours enjoy wide circulation and are self-engendering.

Families can also be contacted by go-betweens, or get in touch with them, to trade information for significant amounts of money. Families will also seek information from fortune tellers or traditional healers, who are thought to be credible sources of information. Even though the information gathered through rumours, go-betweens and fortune tellers is of dubious value and impossible to cross-check, it provides families with "answers." Most importantly, they feel that they are getting the information they desperately seek: *Their missing relative is alive!* Their hopes are fed by rumours and unofficial information and that encourages them to keep searching.

6. The cost of the search: money, bribes, sale of assets

Unofficial sources often exchange information for money. In some instances, authorities are said to have asked for bribes in exchange for information. The search for a missing relative can become financially burdensome. Some families spend a great deal of money on it, and are forced to sell their assets (cars, houses, etc.); this can result in extended periods of indebtedness.

7. Threats and reprisals

In general, missing persons and their families are regarded as victims of conflict and violence. However, it is sometimes claimed by the authorities that among those classified as 'missing persons,' there are some who have joined the opposition and may simply be 'hiding in the woods,' and others who might just have left home without informing their families. Sometimes the authorities also claim publicly that some families know where their missing relatives are.

Thus, families may find that they are perceived as "opposing the authorities." They may face increasing pressure from the authorities: sometimes their personal safety may be threatened. Their access to employment, services and benefits may also be threatened - to force them to put a halt to their activities on behalf of their missing relatives.

Many families also worry about the possibility of threats or reprisals being directed towards those among them who are in charge of the search. These threats are not reported to authorities because, as the families make clear, sometimes the authorities are part of the problem.

Financial difficulties related to the disappearance of relatives

INFORMATION

The families of missing persons have economic and financial problems that are directly related to the disappearance of their loved one. Because their income does not cover their basic needs, many families have to economize on clothes, health care, food, and education for their children. There are various reasons for their financial difficulties, such as:

- reduced, or non-existent, income because of the loss of the (main) breadwinner;
- absence of legal status for the Missing;
- difficulty of gaining access to support, whether from the authorities or from humanitarian agencies;
- scarcity of assistance;
- financial burdensomeness of the search.

These difficulties are magnified for internally displaced persons and refugees.

1. Lack of income owing to loss of breadwinner

Many families with relatives who have gone missing face financial hardship as a direct result of the loss of breadwinner(s). The overwhelming majority of missing persons are men, most of them between the ages of 15 and 30; most of these men are important sources of their families' income; it might also happen that a missing relative is a youth, a future breadwinner, on whom the family had rested its hopes. In many societies, this situation principally affects women who have lost their husbands (and the fathers of their children), elderly parents who have no children to support them and families who have to cope with the loss of more than one wage earner.

The material problems faced by these families are manifold: financial hardship, economic dependence, poor housing conditions, difficulties in bringing up children, difficulties in running their households, difficulties for the elderly without children to take care of them, debts caused by the expenses of the search. This is in addition to other factors that affect the general population as well: high levels of unemployment, lack of skills for the jobs that are available, and endemic corruption.

Families with female breadwinners and numerous children, and families consisting entirely of elderly persons living by themselves, are the most vulnerable.

2. Difficulty of access to support from the authorities and to humanitarian assistance

Some families can be registered as 'social cases' and receive support from the public welfare system. However, when the special status of the surviving relatives of missing persons is not recognized, families often find it difficult to obtain any form of financial compensation or support.

In those cases where humanitarian assistance is available, some families are eligible because they are refugees or internally displaced persons and meet the criteria for vulnerability specified by the various humanitarian organizations.

However, the families of missing persons are usually not regarded as being specifically vulnerable by humanitarian organizations. As a result, there are no assistance programmes for their especial benefit. Some ad hoc assistance is given through family associations or by NGOs, but this is not sustainable.

3. Scarcity of social benefits

A family's income, even if it includes a pension and a salary, is very often not enough to meet basic needs.

The financial difficulties of a family are often magnified when its members are forced to live as internally displaced persons or refugees. Because they have had to flee their homes these families will have lost their main assets, i.e. their property and the sources of their income. When, as is often the case, they are displaced from rural to urban areas, they have difficulty adjusting to life and finding jobs in their new, unfamiliar environments. Agriculturalist families have to cope with the loss of their livelihood because they have no access to land.

When asked to describe how they manage, some families say that they become vendors in the market for someone else; some make trading arrangements on a small scale. Other families have to rely on the kindness of their community or are driven to begging. Another way to cope is by cutting back on health care, education and food, and then going into debt when their basic needs have to be met. Clearly, the future for such families is very uncertain.

CASE

"Everything is difficult because he is not here. It's very difficult for me to live. No one will support me with money if I get sick. People won't give me a loan because I don't have my man to work and pay them back. My neighbours, my community, don't give me any help" – Wife of missing man, Nepal, 2008.

4. The financial burden of the search

Families continue to **spend money on searching for their missing relatives**, primarily for transportation and for communication with government authorities. Some families spend a great deal of money on the search, and are forced to sell their assets (cars, houses, etc.). When they need to, they **borrow money**. This is a coping strategy that leads to high levels of indebtedness.

EXAMPLE

In the Caucasus, some families went so far as to sell property or animals, cut back on their daily expenses (food, health care) or borrow money in order to continue their search – (ICRC, internal assessment report, South Caucasus, September 2008).

The following recommendations should be given consideration:

- **collaboration with family associations (and other similar groups) should be explored.** Family associations know a great deal about the families of the Missing; they would be very useful for collecting and disseminating information; and they would be effective partners in any programme targeting these families. The possibility of collaborating with and providing support for them should be explored;
- **information on Missing-related benefits must be made available to the families of the Missing,** particularly to those who have been identified as especially vulnerable;
- **efforts should be made to minimize search-related expenditures, especially for families living in rural areas;**

- ➔ further direct financial support should be considered for those families of the Missing considered to be particularly vulnerable;
- ➔ the families of the Missing should be given priority access to vocational training, agricultural/live-stock support and micro-credit programmes;
- ➔ the possibility of making more widely available the Missing-related benefits that exist for some categories of family (for example, families of missing military personnel), should be considered.

Psychological and psychosocial consequences of a relative's disappearance

While the families of missing persons endure the same experiences as others affected by armed conflict – destruction of their homes, loss of their jobs and social position, etc. – they also face specific psychological and psychosocial challenges.

In this handbook, the term ‘psychological’ refers to the way individuals cope with a situation and to their thoughts, feelings and personal perceptions. The term “psychosocial” is related to the relationship between individuals and their social environment, mainly their families and their proximate community.

The consequences of the disappearance of relatives will be described from these two perspectives: individual and interpersonal.

 See Section 2, Information Sheet 2.1:
Psychological and psychosocial impact of disappearance, p. 60.

Psychological reactions

The impact of the disappearance of a loved one bears certain resemblances to that of a traumatic event. However, these are two different experiences, each generating specific psychological reactions. A traumatic event is characterized by violence and limitedness of duration; the situation in which relatives of the Missing find themselves has no fixed time limit and the pain and stress they endure is continuous.

Persons who have experienced a traumatic event have to struggle, sometimes in vain, to prevent themselves from thinking about it and from running the event in their minds repeatedly. The relatives of a missing person will, in contrast, do all they can not to forget.

That is why defining the psychological suffering of families, as post-traumatic stress disorder is a mistake. It diminishes the particularity of these experiences and understates the unremitting stress created by uncertainty and the ambiguity of the loss. For families of missing persons, the entire situation – the disappearance and everything connected to it – is traumatic. Absence of information about their missing relative can plunge family members into a **state of distressing uncertainty** that can severely disrupt their lives. This state is marked by:

1. DISTRESSING UNCERTAINTY

Active search

- ➔ Is a major source of stress
- ➔ May lead to physical and mental exhaustion
- ➔ Can be traumatic when it involves looking through dead bodies and exhumations of unmarked mass graves
- ➔ Is sometimes linked to the need for reassurance that the missing person is still alive

Avoidance

- ➔ In confronting the idea of death
- ➔ In confronting others for fear of suffering an emotional breakdown, which may lead to social and emotional isolation

State of constant alertness

- ➔ Makes families unceasingly vigilant

Constantly thinking about the missing person

- Makes him or her an oppressive presence in daily life
- Makes it difficult to concentrate or sleep
- Gives rise to somatic problems

Alternation between hope and despair

- This is an excruciating situation in which people are trapped
- Families may tend to cling to hope for various reasons (religious/cultural and/or psychological)
- Hope also exacts a price
- At any time, factors beyond their control can rekindle the families' despair

Irritability and nervousness

- Low tolerance for other causes of stress
- Unavailability to others

2. GUILT, SELF-ACCUSATION AND ANGER

Guilt and self-accusation related to personal responsibility for:

- Not having prevented the disappearance
- Not being able to protect the missing person
- Not finding the person

Guilt related to the feeling of having abandoned the person when:

- The search is fruitless
- The search is called off
- The family is compelled to declare the missing person dead

Guilt for wanting to lead a normal life because:

- It is incompatible with anxiety over the suffering of the missing person
- There are no traditional rules or norms that encourage the family to move on

Guilt for wanting to put an end to uncertainty

Anger

- Directed towards the missing person and those responsible for his or her disappearance
- It is not always expressed openly; sometimes, it finds expression in dreams

People cope with guilt, self-accusation and anger by finding meaning in their experience

- For example, they explain their relative's disappearance by telling themselves that he went to fight for his country. They cope by:
 - taking part in the struggle against injustice;
 - helping others.

3. EMOTIONAL DISENGAGEMENT AND LOSS OF INTEREST IN OTHER AREAS

- Uncertainty is all-consuming, sapping a person of energy and impeding emotional and intellectual investment in something else
- Involvement in other areas (e.g. pleasurable activities or relationships) can be felt to be a betrayal of the missing person

4. OTHER COMPLICATIONS

Specific signs

- Obsessiveness
- Mental confusion
- Stasis
- Anxiety and depression

Aggravating circumstances

- Family members' presence at the event that occasioned the disappearance
- Loss or disappearance of more than one member of the family

1. Distressing uncertainty

Active search

Driven by their **anxiety to know**, family members spare no effort, and strain their resources, to acquire every scrap of information about their missing relative. To confirm their hope that their missing relative is still alive and for reassurance, many family members will turn to various sources, all of whom are likely to tell them what they want and need to hear. This carries the risk of shoring up false hopes and prevents certain psychological readjustments, which are necessary to cope with the absence of a loved one.

As already mentioned, a number of factors continuously revive the active search: rumours and unofficial information provided by fortune tellers or go-betweens, religious faith, traditional beliefs, the absence of clear information from the authorities, social stigmatization and social pressure.

While searching for information is a perfectly normal reaction, especially in the early years following a disappearance, it is also a significant and lasting source of stress. The length and the intensity of the search might result in physical and mental exhaustion (some families are still actively searching for their missing relative after 25 years). Without guidance, support or restrictions, the search may become traumatic.

EXAMPLE

Some families interviewed by the ICRC in the Caucasus described the pain caused by the search for their missing relatives. They said that they had had to dig up mass graves and search amongst corpses on battlefields.

Avoidance

Fear of the permanent loss of a loved one may be an unrelenting presence in the minds of families, and they might ceaselessly resist the idea of their missing relative's death. This sometimes forces them to fight their own pessimism and to avoid facing facts or meeting people who might confirm their worst fears.

"I try very hard not to let bad ideas enter my head" – Mother in Georgia

The avoidance of other people may also be caused by the **fear of not being able to prevent oneself from breaking down** whenever the missing person is mentioned.

State of constant alertness

The desperate longing to see the missing person and passionate hopes for his or her return might sometimes lead to a state of unnatural alertness.

CASE

"The most difficult thing to overcome is this constant state of nervousness that does not leave you, that at any moment, he could be knocking on the door. During the night, I listen with all my ears and each time I hear a small noise, the first thing that comes to my mind is that my son is back." – Father of a missing person in the South Caucasus (in ICRC, Families of Missing: Needs Assessment, 2008)

Constantly thinking about the missing person

Not knowing the fate of their missing relative and, worse, the knowledge that anything might have happened, creates grave concerns among families. Every reminder of the missing person, however small (his or her clothes, friends, the places he or she usually went to, important dates, etc.), is a catalyst for fresh worries and **makes the absence of the loved one an inescapable feature** of daily life.



Dhading district, Jogimara, Nepal. Relative of missing person.

EXAMPLE

In a survey conducted by the ICRC in the Caucasus, a very high percentage (77%) of interviewees said that they thought about their missing relative – 15 years after his or her disappearance – “all the time.”

Moreover, a number of mothers, believing that their sons/daughters were being held in unidentified detention places, worried constantly about what they were eating and drinking and whether they were suffering in the cold.

This constant worrying can make it **difficult to concentrate** on other matters or **to sleep normally**.

CASE

“He is always with me wherever I go (...) He is walking in my head, talking to me (...) I feel that he is still alive.” – Mother of a young man who disappeared in the South Caucasus (in ICRC, Families of Missing: Needs Assessment, 2008)

The intense anxiety caused by this situation can also give rise to **somatic problems** such as headaches, muscular tensions, and chest pains (see the paragraph on ‘Other complications,’ p. 48).

Alternation between hope and despair

Uncertainty about the fate of their missing relatives can trap families in a state of limbo for years: stuck between hope and despair, or as some have said, “trapped between heaven and earth.”

Some families may deal with the situation by **choosing hope over despair** and by clinging to the most hoped-for scenario (i.e. that their missing relative is still alive). Sometimes, they might even behave as if nothing had really changed in their lives. The cases of mothers continuing to prepare a missing person’s favourite dishes, or leaving the light on in case he or she comes back, have been noted in various contexts. This is a way to keep their loved one alive, in a sense, and to maintain his or her presence within the family.

Clinging to hope is an understandable reaction. It should not be confused with denial when there is no tangible evidence of death and when the family is still actively involved in the search for their relative.

Denial becomes an issue when, despite the existence of sufficient reason for believing that the missing person is dead, the family still refuses to consider the possibility.

INFORMATION

- Clinging to hope is different from denial
- Clinging to hope can prevent people from reorganizing their lives
- In both situations (hope and despair), families remain vulnerable

● CLINGING TO HOPE

A number of factors influence a family’s persistence in hoping:

→ *External factors*

- **The absence of a body** (i.e. proof of death)
- **The absence of reliable information**
- **Ambiguous official statements**
- **The context:** Families might rely on the past history of their country, in which having no news of detained relatives was commonplace.
- **The circumstances of the disappearance:** If the person was arrested at home, the family might be inclined to believe that he or she is being held somewhere, the only question being where.
- **Other positive outcomes:** For instance, the case of a missing soldier’s return after many years or of a prisoner’s release after a lengthy detainment.
- **Unofficial information** from various sources: witnesses (real or false), rumours, go-betweens and fortune tellers. It is important to note that their desperate hopes make some families give credence to far-fetched stories, for instance, that their missing relatives are being used as slaves in other countries.
- **Prevailing attitudes:** Friends and neighbours may encourage the family to hope, because they think it helpful and because they do not want to be the cause of sadness in the family.

→ *The cultural and religious background*

- **Strongly held belief in dreams and portents:** In certain cultures, when relatives² see the missing person in dreams or “feel” his or her presence, it is often interpreted as a sign of life.

“My husband dreamt of him. He was standing up in his dream. This means that he is still alive” –

Mother in Armenia

“I always have the same dream: he is returning home. My daughter also had the same dream:

“This means that he is alive” – Mother in Azerbaijan

In addition, there is belief and trust in traditional priests who sustain the family’s optimism through their own visions and dreams.

- **Superstition:** Some families might also feel that losing hope would be the cause of bad luck for the missing person and that the only way to influence his or her fortunes is to believe that he or she is still alive and will return.

² For example, in Guatemala, the dreams of the missing person’s mother are thought to have more significance than anyone else’s.

→ **Religious beliefs:** Some religions enjoin the necessity of hoping. For instance, Islam requires a person who believes in God to not give up hope. Other religions also require irrefutable evidence of death before the surrender of all hope.³

→ *Psychological factors*

- **Belief in the innocence of the disappeared**

"They will soon realize that he is innocent and will let him go" – Chechen family in Grozny

- **Fear of changing the family dynamic or fear of chaos:** For parents, the death of their children might have a significant impact on their social and emotional roles, on the continuity of the family, and on the achievement of their lives' purpose (raising a family and ensuring a secure old age). This is especially true in societies that are organized around the family unit. Unexpected deaths within the family would cause ruptures and serious changes that relatives may try to avoid by holding on to the belief that their loved one is still alive.

- **Guilt and fear that the missing person may have been abandoned:** *See paragraph on 'Guilt, self-accusation and danger,' p. 46.*

- **Intense desire to see the person again**

- **Fear of madness and extreme sadness:** Everyone has his or her own forms of protection from intense feelings of loss. Attempting to be detached about the absence of someone close, without any external pressure to do so, is not easy.

"I have to keep on hoping. Otherwise, I will go crazy" – Father in Azerbaijan

● THE COSTS OF HOPING

Hope exacts a heavy price. It implies considerable expense of means and energy (visiting fortune tellers, continuing to search, etc.). It can also immobilize people by fixing them in a certain state of mind, which restricts their social and emotional lives (Garcia Castro, 1997). This happens when they cannot bring themselves to accept the absence of their loved one, but feel it intensely, every day.

● DESPAIR

Even when people begin to lose hope and give up the idea of ever seeing their loved one again, they will continue to be tormented by uncertainty. In the absence of concrete proof of death, the smallest signs can revive hope: omens, false information, rumours, etc.

CASE

Maryam was still a teenager when her family lost track of her older brother – barely more than a teenager himself – who had left to fight in the war. Now, at the age of 32, Maryam lives with her husband and her son in a small flat.

Maryam has a full-time job and takes care of her family. But often, in quiet moments, the anguish over the fate of her older brother comes back. "Years have passed, and we still do not know whether our brother is alive or was killed; whether he was wounded or taken prisoner," she says.

For Maryam the worst part is the constant shifting between hope and despair. "Conflicting reports tear open our wounds that are still fresh. Once, one of our relatives phoned us from his home town, and said: 'I heard your brother's voice on the radio.' Our forlorn hopes were rekindled."

"Years went by, and just when we thought we were getting used to the idea of his not coming back, there was a mass repatriation of prisoners of war. They informed us that our brother was among the prisoners, and that he was on his way home."

"I will never forget how my father gave away his vases, which were his pride and joy, as presents to the neighbours and other relatives. We lit up the street, and watched constantly for his arrival. Nothing happened. It was just a confusion of names."

With no information to the contrary, Maryam and her family keep hoping that one day her brother will be walking down the street, coming back to his family.

From ICRC: <http://www.icrc.org>

³ See also ICRC, *The Missing and their Families: Action to Resolve the Problem of People Unaccounted for as a Result of Armed Conflict or Internal Violence and to Assist their Families*, ICRC, Geneva, 2002.

In the end, it is important to keep in mind that whether they are hopeful or despairing, families are very fragile: their fears, doubts or hopes remain close to the surface, preventing the scarring of deep wounds.

Irritability/Nervousness

Because of their anxiety over the whole situation, people may become impatient and irritable. They may find it more difficult to deal with routine sources of stress in their daily lives. This state of barely controlled jitteriness can also be the cause of tensions within the family and beyond it. Some people may try to cope by distancing themselves from others or by restricting their social lives.

2. Guilt, self-accusation and anger

Guilt is a powerful emotion that can hinder the coping process. The belief that they are personally responsible for the fate of their loved one can trap people in their distress. Guilt is often a compound of feelings: self-accusation and, sometimes, anger towards the missing person and those responsible for his or her disappearance. Depending on their intensity and duration, these emotions can exacerbate the psychological suffering of families.

Guilt and self-accusation related to personal responsibility

Families often tend to blame themselves: for not having prevented their relative's disappearance, not being able to protect him or her, letting people take him or her, not being able to find him or her, and so on. When someone has gone missing in action, feelings of guilt might prevail among the male members of the family: they might feel that they let their brother or son go to war instead of them, that they put their own lives and family pride before their loved one.

"I should not have let him go to fight" – Father in Armenia

"I should have gone with him to war! Where is my son now so that I could lend him a hand?" – Father in Azerbaijan

"My husband died one year after the disappearance; he got sick and exhausted himself searching for him and felt guilty (...) He is the one who educated our son to be a patriot" – Mother in Azerbaijan

Guilt related to the feeling of having abandoned the person

If they are **not searching**, or if the search is **proving fruitless**, many families might begin to feel that they have, in fact, abandoned their loved one. This anxiety can be compounded by guilt for **not having done enough** or for not taking certain steps.

When families are compelled, against their convictions, to **declare the missing person dead**, they might experience similar feelings of having abandoned or betrayed their loved one. Some might even say that they feel they have killed their loved one themselves (see case box below).

Guilt for wanting to lead a normal life

Families who are consumed by worries about the suffering of their loved one might find it difficult to lead normal lives.

"How can I think of myself, eat well, keep myself warm when my son could be cold or hungry?" – Mother in Grozny

Such feelings of guilt might also be encouraged by the absence of social norms that guide families through their experience and encourage them to continue to go about their daily lives as usual. In ordinary circumstances of loss, lives resume their aspect of normality after a certain period, but when a relative disappears, there is no limit to the amount of time that has to pass before families can return to their usual social routines.

Families can create such feelings amongst themselves, particularly amongst those who want to move out of the inner circle of family distress.

Guilt for wanting to put an end to uncertainty

Families might also feel guilty for wanting to put an end to their distress. Uncertainty is so burdensome that people might begin to feel that any kind of certainty is preferable to their current situation, even if it means learning of the permanent loss of their loved one. Afterwards, they are assailed by feelings of guilt for putting their needs first and for bringing bad luck to the family.

CASE

After having declared their husbands dead in order to benefit from social welfare, women in the Balkans said that they felt that they were the ones who had “killed” them. Some women even feared that declaring their husband dead without proof would put them in an impossible situation if ever he returned: “How could I explain to him that I proclaimed him dead if he comes back one day?”

From ICRC, *Accompanying Families of Missing Persons: A Practical Handbook*, Published in the Balkans, 2008.

Anger

Although families direct their anger mainly towards those responsible for causing their relative’s disappearance, it is normal to also feel resentment towards the missing person for making them suffer so much: “*I told him not to go to war, but he did not listen,*” a mother in Azerbaijan said.

It is important to note that anger is not always expressed openly and consciously. It may be discerned in dreams reported by family members: “*I dreamt that we were all sitting at our table and he was sitting there without saying a word. I yelled at him: ‘Aren’t you ashamed?’ But he did not raise his head,*” said the sister of a missing person in Grozny.

INFORMATION

Feelings of guilt, self-accusation and anger are intensified by the fact that families often have to carry on the search for the missing person by themselves.

Over time, these emotions, combined with sadness over the absence of the missing person, tend to lower self-esteem and increase feelings of helplessness among family members.

How do people cope?

People cope in many ways. While some will try to **find meaning in their experience**, others will immerse themselves in the search for their loved one, in **the struggle for justice**, and in **helping others**. There are also those who seek solace in signs and dreams.

⌚ See Section 2, information Sheet 2.5: *Psychological framework-Ambiguous loss* (Boss, 2006), p. 64.

CASE

After searching for over twenty years for her brother, C. has a dream one day. In it, her brother appears to her and says that her search is futile because he was killed and his body burnt. After this dream, C. finds that she is able to mourn and stops searching for her brother.

From an interview conducted by the ICRC in Guatemala

3. Emotional disengagement and loss of interest in other areas

Uncertainty and its psychological consequences sap one’s energy; very little is left over for any other emotional investment. “*I have four children but I have only one; he replaces all the others. It is as if they do not exist anymore,*” says a mother, referring to her son who went missing 15 years ago. Such statements indicate how the missing person can overshadow everyone else in the family, how wide the gap created by his absence can be, and how long that gap can remain.

Relatives who are tempted to take pleasure in activities or in other relationships can feel that they are betraying the memory of the missing person. Consequently, they may restrict their social lives or disregard their own emotional needs.

4. Other complications

Specific signs

When there are no clear answers, when a person is beset by ambivalent feelings and in a state of limbo – with very few resources for coping and very few helpful external factors (supportive environment, rituals) – his or her daily life might, over time, become seriously affected. The following are the most commonly observed complications:

- ➔ **Obsessiveness:** The need to know can become obsessive and take the form of a compulsion to keep searching. All personal needs as well as the needs of other family members are set aside and family life becomes secondary to the search for the missing relative. For some parents encountered by the ICRC in the course of internal surveys and interviews, finding their missing relative had become the only goal in their lives.
- ➔ **Mental confusion:** The intensity of families' feelings can distort their perceptions and make them believe that see their relative everywhere: on the street, on television, in the newspaper, and so on.

CASE

During her prayers, which may not be interrupted, Mrs B. sees her son – missing for 20 years – pass in front of her and go to the kitchen. When, her prayers over, she runs to the kitchen, her son is not there. Afterwards, she struggles to convince herself that what she saw was only a vision.

Families of missing in Lebanon (ICRC Internal Assessment, 2007)

➔ **Stasis:** In extreme cases, the belief that the missing person might turn up at any moment immobilizes people's lives: for instance, the father of a missing person has not left his house for years, for fear that his missing son might have forgotten his keys. For such people, it is as if life came to a standstill when their loved one disappeared and will resume only when he or she returns. They find themselves unable to cope with uncertainty, with the potential changes in their lives, and with life itself.

➔ **Anxiety and depression:** The extreme frustration related to the absence of clear answers, a never-ending series of questions, constant self-accusation, guilt, concern over the missing person, and alternations between hope and despair can wear people out, physically and mentally. They might become emotionally vulnerable and suffer physical exhaustion; and, after a while, overwhelmed by their unrelenting anxiety, be left without any taste for pleasure, human relationships and social life.

Anxiety may be described as a combination of tension, nervousness, uneasiness and worry, all of which are common reactions to stress. However, when they become excessive in terms of intensity and duration, they can be crippling.

Depression is characterized by a number of physical and psychological symptoms, of which the most common are these: sadness, fatigue, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, tearfulness, lowered self-esteem, withdrawal, and loss of interest in habitual activities.

CASE

"Since my son disappeared, I do not eat or drink well, I am as if dead, sitting in the corner and doing nothing. I do not work anymore and cannot concentrate. Why did he have to go and I to stay?" – Mother in the North Caucasus (ICRC Internal report)

Both anxiety and depression can also take the following forms: physical complaints (chronic headaches, chest pains, difficulty in breathing, loss of appetite, etc.), sleep disorders (e.g. difficulty in falling asleep, interrupted sleep), distractiveness, and lapses of memory.

Intense anxiety and depressive states often coexist in persons who have to cope for an extended period with the disappearance of someone close to them. This emotional state is **not to be confused with grieving**, because people do not regard themselves as having suffered an actual loss. It is like an open wound that will not scar, and persons who find themselves in this state are ceaselessly sad and under continuous stress.

Most families, in a number of different contexts, find it difficult to express such suffering in words.



Dafné Martos/ICRC

Putis, Peru. A woman examines a piece of cloth for traces of a loved one.

Usually, they do so obliquely, by referring to physical problems or to the difficulties faced by other family members.

Aggravating circumstances

→ **Family members' presence at the events that occasioned the disappearance:** If family members were present at the event preceding the disappearance (arrest, attack, massacre, etc.) and if their lives were also threatened, it will have an effect: they can be haunted by their own experience to such a degree as to be unable to cope with the disappearance of their relative. Some family members might also feel guilty that they survived while their relative might not be as fortunate. When the circumstances of the disappearance are coupled with another traumatic experience (shelling, massacre, etc.), dealing with uncertainty and the possible loss of a loved one can be even more challenging.

→ **Loss or disappearance of more than one member of the family**

CASE

S. was fourteen when his village was attacked. Men were separated from women and he ended up with his mother while his father was taken away. His mother states that years after the fact, S. remains obsessed with the event, and that even though his father's body was identified and buried, he keeps repeating that he should have gone with his father and not been saved.

Anecdotal evidence collected by the ICRC in the Balkans

The psychosocial impact

In addition to psychological problems, most individuals also have to deal with difficulties within their families and their social environment.

1. PROBLEMS WITHIN THE FAMILY

Lack of communication because of

- The desire to protect one another from pain
- Disagreements among family members about the fate of the missing person

Issues faced by wives of missing persons

- Having to go along with the views of their in-laws and to keep on waiting
- Conflicts with their in-laws regarding guardianship of the children, remarriage, and division of benefits to which the children are lawfully entitled

Challenges in assuming new roles and responsibilities

- As the head of the family and/or as the principal breadwinner

Burdening children

- By protecting them from facts, which interferes with their need to understand what is happening around them and, for older children, to feel part of the family experience
- By giving them unspoken responsibilities, to fill the gap left by the missing persons

The unvoiced suffering of siblings

- Survivor's guilt
- Excessive devotion to consoling the parents

Breach in family history

2. PROBLEMS IN THE FAMILIES' RELATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Difficulties related to defining own status

- This affects family members' sense of their place in existing social groups

Stigmatization

- Of families suspected of being associated with rebel groups
- Of wives left alone as a result of their husbands' disappearance
- Of wives believed to have brought bad luck to their husbands

Emotional isolation owing to

- The inability to share personal distress with others (fear of not being understood, of being confronted with the idea of death, of being considered weak or burdensome)
- The difficulty that other people have in recognizing their suffering

Absence of guidance: Communal and religious (lack of common ground, socially, or of rituals adapted to their situation may deny families certain possibilities)

- Finding meaning in their experience
- Finding a place for their loved one within the community
- Easing their suffering by sharing it with others
- Paying tribute to their loved one

3. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FORGETTING

- Preserving the memory of the missing person
- Maintaining his or her place within the community of belonging

1. Problems within the family

The joint family, often the building block of a traditional society, can be an important source of support, economic and emotional. However, in many cases, it is the source of additional stress and pain. This happens especially when family members are unable to communicate with one another or understand one another's difficulties, or find ways of coping with their situation. These difficulties can be exacerbated by various traditional restraints on human behaviour: for instance, socio-cultural barriers and beliefs that prevent individuals from expressing their thoughts and feelings openly.

Lack of communication

When family members communicate openly and share one another's concerns during a crisis, they can set priorities together and provide mutual support. Lack of communication may render a family less responsive to one another and less capable of pooling their resources to cope with their difficulties.

This lack of communication can be explained by the following factors:

- **The desire to protect one another:** To spare each other pain, some family members may be reluctant to express their true feelings and avoid speaking openly about the missing person. Some of them may also avoid sharing information with the rest of the family, particularly bad news. The case of a man who buried his brother 15 years ago, and is yet to tell his parents, is vividly illustrative of this attitude.

CASE

A.'s two brothers went missing. After the body of his first brother was discovered, A. stopped searching for the other one, believing that he too may be dead. Although he continues to worry about the way the body of his second brother may have been handled, he believes that he is able to cope.

However, he remains very concerned about his mother, and he is still unable to tell what he thinks might have happened to her son. He is certain that the news would bring about a collapse. But waiting for news is depleting her strength by the day.

- **The desire to avoid conflict related to disagreements within the family:** Sometimes, family members have trouble dealing with one another because they are not equally reconciled to the loss of their relative. While some might wish to move on, others will continue to hope and live as if nothing had changed, and as if nothing should change. This divergence of attitudes might diminish the resilience of the family and create conflicts.

CASE

R. states that since the disappearance of her brother her entire family has lost its cheerfulness. She says that it is no longer possible to talk about anything not related to her brother: most conversations are taken over by memories and stories associated with him. Everybody mentions her brother, in order to fill the gap left by his absence. They think that when he returns a new life will begin for the family.

Issues faced by wives of missing persons

Besides the various complications associated with the marriage issue (willingness to re-marry or being forced to), in many contexts, wives of missing persons are under pressure from their in-laws: they are expected to go along with their in-laws' views on their husbands' fate and to await their return. These women might feel trapped because they are not permitted to express their own views on the issue. Furthermore, in many societies, children belong to the husband and in case he is absent, to his family. Should a missing person's wife decide to rebuild her life by venturing outside her in-laws' family (e.g. by remarrying), she will have to leave her children behind.

Because leaving their children behind is difficult to do, many mothers resign themselves to this situation created by social conventions, and stay. Besides the emotional toll that leaving the children behind might exact, mothers who do leave will find themselves without the income they sometimes obtain through their

children (in many areas, financial support is given only to the missing person's children). On the other hand, these women will also know that if they take their children with them, they will be withdrawing economic support from the entire family, and that might cause conflicts.

Moreover, the wife of a missing person – one who is still living with her in-laws – is often required to set aside her own distress quickly, to tend to other members of the family (for instance, the missing person's mother, whose pain is recognized, by convention, to be greater than hers). Should the wife show signs of distress, she might be thought to be failing in her duties, incompetent or weak.

The challenge of taking up a new role

The absence of the breadwinner(s) would require other members to assume the responsibility of supporting their family. In many situations, women will find themselves forced to earn a living and **taking up a double role** for which they might not necessarily be prepared, and in which they might sometimes feel inadequate.

"I am obliged to be mother and father for our children. I do not know how to deal with my son's problems at school. He needs a man to discipline and guide him; I cannot do this on my own" – Young mother of two children, whose husband is missing.

Burdening children

Children are very sensitive to emotions and changes within the family circle. Their reactions to the disappearance or loss of a family member will depend on the way persons from their immediate emotional environment cope with the situation.

Like any painful subject, the truth about the disappearance of a parent or of a close relative might be kept from children in order to give them the impression that the world was a secure place where bad things seldom occurred. Because they regard their children as vulnerable and innocent, **parents might shield them** from painful and difficult experiences by excluding them from important events or discussions.

Attempts to spare children might not always be effective: some children do become aware of the altered emotional state of the other members of the family (sadness, anxiety, withdrawal, etc.), and keeping news from children will clash with their **natural curiosity**, whatever their age or level of maturity.

Adult reticence on the subject of the missing person can cause children distress: it can, sometimes, lead to their emotional withdrawal or make them wonder whether they are at fault: *"Why does my mother cry all the time, have I done something bad?"* Furthermore, assuming that children are too young to grasp the situation can also prevent parents from understanding how the absence of the loved one in question is affecting them.

In circumstances of uncertainty and unresolved grief, necessary communication between adults and children might not be easily achieved. This can lead children to suppose that **asking questions causes pain** to their other parent or family member, and may cause more tension and create distance between themselves and their adult relatives. At the same time, parents or close relatives may find it hard to talk about the missing person, because of their own ideas about the child's understanding and needs.

"When they started asking about their father, I struggled for words. When my husband went, my youngest son was four years old. He was a very impatient boy. I could not tell him that his father had been martyred and I could not say that he was in prison, or that he should get used to his absence. How long were they supposed to wait for him?" – From the ICRC website: <http://www.gva.icrc.priv/eng>

Experience shows as well that many mothers tend to rely too much on their children by being overprotective and by giving them a place different from that normally intended for a child (e.g. being the head of the family, being the mother's only reason for living). Although this can be perceived as a way of coping that allows mothers to find the necessary resources to move on, statements like *"you are the man in the family now"* or *"you are my only reason for living"* may **overburden the child with adult responsibilities and expectations**.

These particular roles given to children can have a contradictory meaning when they are associated with the conviction that the missing person will return. In other words, when "invited" to take up these

responsibilities, children may become concerned about taking someone else's place and possibly angering that person upon his return.

Children may also try to make their mothers happy in various ways (e.g. "*His wish is to make his mother happy in every way by doing well at school!*") or try to please them by saying what they need to hear.

CASE

A. and S. are sisters aged nine and ten. They are the daughters of a missing person. The two of them, and their mother, now live with their father's family. They need no prompting to talk about their father. Most of their sentences begin in the same way: "When he is back, we will ..." The mother explains how good it feels to hear this and how her two little daughters help her cope with the pain of her husband's disappearance.

From ICRC, internal report, North Caucasus, 2008

In other cases, the opposite may happen. Because they are overprotected, **children or adolescents may find themselves not only excluded from their families' experience** but also exempted from many responsibilities, leading them to think that they are of no help in consoling their parents or family members. Consolation is precisely what many children, especially adolescents, yearn to provide their elders, as it can bolster their self-esteem significantly. It also helps them to acquire a sense of belonging within a family, where they have an important role to play.

Whatever the attitude of the surviving parent, the main issue for him or her is finding the proper balance between giving children a place and responsibilities within the family and being mindful of their level of development and needs without excluding them from difficult matters.

The suffering of siblings

When parents focus almost exclusively on their missing child, their guilt, combined with their yearning to see him or her, can be so great that they cannot help but **idealize** that person, often to the disadvantage of their other children. This can create difficult situations.

Like the wives of the missing, siblings can also find themselves trapped. The fact that they survived, instead of their brother or sister, can cause them to feel **guilty**; their being able to carry on with their lives might become another source of guilt. They might also feel obliged to remain close to their parents and to expend excessive amounts of effort in consoling their parents, often neglecting their own needs. They might also have to bear the burden of searching for their missing sibling if their parents are elderly or incapable of taking on the search themselves.

These feelings of guilt can be reinforced by parents who, while speaking of their missing child, make remarks like "Why did they take the best one?"

Breach in family history

When a person goes missing, it **can create a breach in the history of the family**. While others in the community can tell stories about their relatives, the families of the Missing remain in a state of suspension. A breach has been created in the family's history, and it may **affect their sense of continuity**. Members of the family could spend an entire lifetime trying to fill that gap and to recover the missing sections of the family narrative.



Agnès Montanari/ICRC

A study in sorrow: this woman has a relative who is missing.

2. Problems in the families' relations with the community

"When there is ambiguous loss and few facts, being able to reconstruct who one is requires trust in self and others." (Boss, 2006)

⌚ See Section 2, *Information Sheet 2.5: Psychological framework-Ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006), p. 64.*

Difficulties related to the absence of status for surviving family members

The absence of codified gestures (see the example below) or social processes of recognition after a relative has gone missing can make it difficult for family members to discover the nature of their new status within the community. They are caught in a state of limbo: their previous social position is invalid but they are without the means to discover how they fit in now. Women might have to wonder whether they are widows; and children might ask themselves whether they are orphans, as their father may not be alive, or whether that matters, as their missing father still has a social identity and a place within the community.

EXAMPLE

In Nepal, when someone is widowed, the older widows in the community take the bangles from her arms, the glass beads from her neck, and the *mangal sutra* (a black pearl on a thread around her neck) and mash it all with a stone. They also wash the red *tika* and *sindhur* from her forehead. Women whose husbands are missing continue to wear the *sindhur*, bangles, *mangal sutra* and *tika*, and do not consider themselves widows. They nevertheless face the same loneliness and financial strain as any widow. They cannot permit themselves to think their husbands dead or to mourn.

From ICRC internal report, Nepal 2007

The fact that the missing person has no proper social status makes it more difficult for his or her close relatives to feel part of a recognized social group. Unlike the relatives of the dead, who have the specific social status of mourners, they cannot benefit from codified rituals that provide them a place in the community (one that is related to their situation) and a less ambiguous social identity.

Stigmatization

In certain contexts, disappearances become an extremely sensitive issue when they take place within the framework of violent tensions or armed conflict between two or more antagonistic groups: in these instances, families of missing persons can be suspected of being close to or associated with "rebel" groups.

People from their social environment, **apprehensive of becoming tainted by association**, might decide to keep their distance from the families of missing persons.

In some communities, the wives of men who are missing may face stigmatization because they have been **left without male protection** or because they have been forced to transgress certain social norms and take on male roles. The stigmatization may go even further when these women are also thought to be bearers of misfortune.

EXAMPLE

In the Balkans, there are instances of the wives of missing persons being shunned by other women in the community because they were regarded as "husband stealers."

In Sri Lanka, women whose husbands have disappeared are believed to be bearers of bad karma, or bad luck. They may be subjected to discrimination, stigmatized and banned from certain ceremonies and forbidden entry to the houses of newly-weds.

ICRC internal reports

Emotional/Social isolation

The emotional repercussions of the disappearance of a relative can disrupt family members' relations with others in their social environment. They often find it difficult to share their distress with persons in their immediate surroundings because:

- they do not want to impose on others by endlessly re-telling the same stories and/or to add to their own suffering by talking about it;
- they may feel that their experience is so unusual, even unique, that nobody would understand it;
- they can also be reluctant to involve others in their distress because they do not themselves have clear answers to their questions. "*What do I say about my husband if somebody asks me, when I myself do not know?*" – Wife of a missing man in the Balkans (ICRC Internal report);
- in certain cultures, expressing emotions and deep feelings might be regarded as a weakness, especially for men;
- some people might be unwilling to express their emotions for fear of being overwhelmed; or because they feel that merely talking about what they dread most might bring it about.

This avoidance of others can seriously disrupt people's social networks, depriving them of sources of support when those are needed most.

CASE

After the disappearance of her son, D. spent three months in bed. Though still extremely sad and in distress, she managed to resume some of her regular activities. However, she never managed to return to her job: she could not bear the presence of her colleagues any more. Listening to them all day long made her anxious and, eventually, she quit her job. Today, she continues to show signs of distress and anger, but she says that she feels worse talking to people about it.

From ICRC internal reports, North Caucasus, 2008

The intense **distress** felt by families waiting for answers can go **unnoticed** by those in their immediate surroundings. In other circumstances (e.g. the death of a family member), by expressing their grief in recognized ways (e.g. at burials, during the period of mourning), families will attract the sympathy and support they need. When their grief cannot be signalled in such ritualized ways, their suffering may go unheeded and end in emotional isolation.

It is also the case that persons in their social orbit might find it hard to convey sympathy, because they cannot imagine how someone coping with the disappearance of a loved one could be comforted. They might wonder whether it is better to be encouraging and say, "You will find him" or to do otherwise, by saying, "You should accept, move on and put the past behind you."

Absence of guidance: Communal and religious

Usually, families turn to religion or to the traditions of their community for comfort, support, and even meaningful answers. Religious faith, or believing that everything that happens is part of a larger design, can help some people to find the necessary spiritual strength to endure painful experiences.

The disappearance of an individual from his or her family and community is an unusual occurrence, and expressions of sympathy or solidarity are insufficient at best. In such cases, nobody really knows what to do, not even the families. Having no recourse to rituals of symbolic value pertinent to their situation, especially in contexts where religious and traditional practices are at the heart of social life, makes it even harder for families to fit a meaning to their experience and lessen their pain.

"In our church, we light candles for the living and candles for the dead, but where do we place the candles for our missing family members?" – Family in the Balkans (ICRC Report)

ⓘ See Section 2, Information Sheet 2.3: *The importance of rituals for the families of the Missing*, p. 62.

Other aggravating circumstances

The vulnerability of the families may increase in **situations of forced migration** because of the different lifestyles, experiences, sets of values and languages in the host country. Besides depriving families of their customary support system, these situations may give rise to feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy and of being misunderstood.

The unfamiliar surroundings, the absence of their usual sources of emotional sustenance, the heavy financial burden: all this can exacerbate the suffering of families and make it extremely difficult for them to recover from their various losses and traumatic experiences. They might choose to hold fast to the hope that their missing relatives will return: this would reassure them that not everything in their past life has been lost.

3. The struggle against forgetting

The disappearance of their relative presents families with another important challenge: not to let him or her disappear completely under the silence and the uncertainty. That is why many families maintain the struggle to keep the memory of their relative alive and to preserve his or her place in the community.

"If I forget him who would remember?" – Daughter of a missing person

Missing persons do not, by definition, have graves or other sites commemorating them. This forces families to find other ways of preserving their missing relative's existence. Searching for answers, fighting for formal recognition of his or her status (e.g. "missing person," "martyr," "victim of war"), talking about him or her, maintaining his or her place intact in the family: all these are means by which relatives preserve the memory of a missing relative.

Granting the Missing a formal status and a place to commemorate them is greatly valued by families and their communities. It will enable the families to reintegrate their missing relative into their shared history – the family's and the community's – and fill the void created by the disappearance.

Accepting the loss of a family member without proof of death

1. Acceptance of the loss

It is a process that takes place by degrees and depends on several factors, internal and external.

→ Internal factors are related to individual characteristics and beliefs

CASE

For over ten years, Mrs S. rejected the idea of her son's death. Her daughter could not discuss the subject with her even though she knew that her brother – kidnapped during the conflict – was dead. The lamp outside their house was always kept lit in case he turned up in the middle of the night, and Mrs S. made sure that his room remained unchanged. More than ten years after her son's disappearance (and presumed death), Mrs S. baked a cake on his birthday. She gave it a name: "Sighs of Despair." This was her way of showing that she was ready to mourn.

From ICRC internal report, South Caucasus, 2008

→ External factors include such things as

- Information from witnesses about the possibility that the missing person is dead
- Official statements
- Change in the political situation: at the end of a conflict, for example, when all prisoners have been released and there is still no trace of the missing person
- Religious ruling (e.g. declaring the missing person a *shahid*, or martyr) or laws that permit the acceptance or declaration of the death after a certain period
- Confrontation with the possibility of death, when exhumations are carried out or during other specific moments (*see Section 4, p. 124*)
- Support from immediate social environment (group of families, friends, family unit)

2. The challenges of the grieving process

→ Grieving is an individual and social process

→ **Grieving in the absence of a body:** Rituals that symbolically acknowledge the death can help families and their community to accept the fact and begin grieving

Every society provides ways to help people take the first steps towards accepting loss and to give meaning to their experience. Rituals, such as funerals and the formal reception of condolences, contribute to that. They mark the final separation from the deceased and provide the family with an opportunity to say farewell, to pay their respects and to give public expression to their pain. When everything is done in accordance with accepted social usage, relatives can feel some peace of mind, because they have done their duty towards the deceased, the community and, in some cultures, towards their ancestors.

EXAMPLE

In Guatemala, it is believed that whoever is denied a dignified funeral will shout from under the ground and disturb the living.

For Hindu Nepalese, failure to perform the final rites will condemn the soul to wandering, possibly as a ghost. Final rites without a body can be performed only 100 years after the presumed death/disappearance. Should a missing person return after the performance of the necessary rituals, the family will have to repeat those rituals after the birth of a child.

In Sri Lanka, the soul of a dead person who is denied a traditional funeral is thought to be imprisoned, making reincarnation impossible, interrupting the cycle of life and preventing access to the state of *nirvana* (complete liberation). This explains why so many families, having failed, as it were, to meet their obligation, continue to make offerings and sacrifices in exchange for a priest's or monk's benevolence. The inability of the missing person's relatives to perform the funeral rites puts them in a very difficult situation.



Olav Saltbones/Norwegian Red Cross

Pristina, Kosovo. Pictures of missing persons on a fence outside a public building. The people in the photographs have been missing since the war that ended in 1999.

Grieving in the absence of a body presents the family with another emotional challenge, even when they have reconciled themselves to the likelihood that their loved one is dead. Without the body, families of missing persons cannot properly honour the memory of their loved ones or carry out burial ceremonies required by custom. This might cause them to believe that they have failed to ensure a peaceful afterlife for their loved one; and that can mean having to cope with feelings of intense guilt, even perhaps with the sense that they have betrayed their loved one, in addition to all the difficult psychological challenges before them.

CASE

"My brother and his family were kidnapped in Baghdad. His wife and children were released after a short while. His wife had to pay a considerable amount of money for proof that her husband was alive. All of us hoped to see him again, even though we had received no news of him for more than a month. It was weeks after my brother's kidnapping that we learnt that he had been killed. Now we know where he is buried, but we are not able to visit his grave. All we want now is to go there and say our last prayers, to say goodbye" – ICRC internal report

When the body is not handed over to them, as can happen sometimes, families might feel that their loved one is still among enemies and being held hostage. This might add to their difficulties in dealing with the past and moving on.

The alternatives

In Brittany, a long time ago, when sailors failed to return from sea, their families performed a ceremony, the *proella*. The missing sailor's body was replaced by a cross made of wax, which was placed on a white table-cloth. Afterwards, the cross was taken to a church where all the *proella* crosses were laid together until the first day of November. On that day, the crosses were taken to the cemetery and buried together in a grave under the collective name of "Proella." The decision to perform the ceremony was made by the community and not by individual families. The purpose of the ceremony was to prevent families from waiting without

hope for the return of their relative and to hasten the process of dealing with the consequences of losing a breadwinner.⁴

Emblematic funerals, with objects of a certain kind representing the deceased, exist. They are not common practice, but may be performed and/or offered to families by their communities and religious groupings when death has been confirmed. The most common alternative to funerals of the usual kind is the construction of memorials and cenotaphs. There are other ways of doing this, as shown in the box below.

EXAMPLE

In Timor, a stone may be taken from the place of death (or presumed death) – because such objects may be imbued with the spirit of the dead – and buried, to allow the spirit of the missing person to rest. Families believe that in the absence of such a ritual (or burial of the body) they make themselves vulnerable to sickness, even to death. There are also instances of memorials being erected to the Missing, in the absence of their corpses, but this appears to be done largely by more westernized families and remains rare. The centrality of the Church in Timorese life also enables church services and masses to play a role in giving comfort to families.

In Nepalese death rituals, a straw dummy may take the place of a corpse and be burnt, but there should be no doubt whatsoever that the person in question is dead: the ritual may not proceed otherwise.

In Judaism, when death has been established, but it is not possible to recover the body, a stone bearing the dead person's name may be placed in the cemetery. The family may also place a candle bearing the name of the missing person in the synagogue.

Christians do not hold funerals in the absence of the body but permit prayers and certain types of ceremonies. The Orthodox Church provides for an annual service (performed on the second Saturday before Lent) for people whose death occurred outside the country and who were not given proper funerals.

In Islam, Sunnis permit "prayers for the absent," but not funerals without corpses. However, Shiites permit the building of memorials containing the personal belongings of the deceased.

Hinduism does not permit funerals, but the family may say prayers and purify itself by ritual baths.

In Tibet (Vajranaya Buddhism) specific prayers are said – even at a distance – for the body to be given a proper burial.

From ICRC sources: *Field reports from East Timor and Nepal*, and from *The Missing: The Right to Know*

⁴ Adapted from M.-F. Bacqué, 2003.

INFORMATION SHEET 2.1 Psychological and psychosocial impact of disappearance

At the community / social level

- Stigmatization
- Isolation
- Avoidance/Withdrawal
 - Undefined status
 - Absence of rituals

In the family environment

- Disagreements over the fate of the missing person
- Difficulties in communicating with the rest of the family / Emotional isolation
 - Challenges associated with changed roles
 - Breach in family history
 - Struggle against forgetting

At the individual level

- Distressing uncertainty
- Entrapment between hope and despair
 - Guilt, self-accusation, anger
- Lack of interest in other areas, social and emotional

INFORMATION SHEET 2.2 The grieving process

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THE REACTIONS OF AN INDIVIDUAL TO THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE?

- Relationship with the deceased
- Age/Sex of the bereaved person
- Circumstances of loss (whether the person suffered a violent death)
- Personal characteristics
- Social and cultural environment

WHAT ARE THE USUAL REACTIONS TO LOSS?

During this process, people can be vulnerable and in great need of support. Although we cannot generalize the experience of loss because individuals react differently (see above) and with differing degrees of intensity, experts have noted certain common patterns of reaction:

Shock, denial

Initial reactions are usually of denial and/or shock at the loss. It is important to note that this denial provides temporary protection and allows the person to slowly absorb the idea of loss. Denial can manifest itself in a number of ways:

- "It has not happened"
- Gaps in memories of the deceased
- Absence of reaction
- Numbed automaton-like behaviour: carrying on as if nothing has happened
- Intense psychological reaction – protection against complete breakdown

Protest, anger

After the shock has been registered, the person comes to realize, gradually, that the loss is real and cannot be denied for long. To make their pain more bearable, some people might become angry: they find people to blame for their loss, including themselves. Their loss can induce feelings of powerlessness in them, and of guilt, for not having been able to prevent it. They might also direct their anger towards the deceased, because he or she has abandoned them, as it were.

Despair, depression

This stage is characterized by the awareness that the loss is permanent and that nothing will bring the dead person back.

At this stage, when the person is fully aware of the void in his or her life, feelings of despair are likely to set in, and this necessitates various psychological adjustments. It is important to keep the person under close watch during this phase because of the possibility that he or she might become self-destructive (drink to excess, "act out," etc.). The absence of support is another danger: it will isolate the person even further.

Acceptance

This last stage is attained when thoughts of the deceased cause less pain, and the person begins to take an interest in things and makes plans for the future.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS IS NOT TO FORGET THE DECEASED BUT TO REMEMBER HIM OR HER IN A WAY THAT CAUSES LESS PAIN

- The stages are not clearly defined: people can go back and forth between them.
- New research has shown that grief, besides its psychological and physical manifestations, also has social and spiritual dimensions. The length of the mourning period varies from culture to culture; of course, it also depends on the nature of the loss.
- Sometimes – during anniversaries, for instance – symptoms of an earlier stage of grieving might re-emerge.

INFORMATION SHEET 2.3 The importance of rituals for the families of the Missing

Rituals for coping with uncertainty are important for the following reasons.

Communal rituals enable the families to give meaning to their experience. They make it possible for families to reaffirm the existence of their missing relatives and to restore them to their place in their community. By honouring them through rituals, the community reaffirms their social identity (someone's son, daughter, parent, etc.). Rituals also reassure the families that what has happened to them is within the realm of human experience, and that situations like theirs have been foreseen.

Rituals can take the edge off the suffering of the families because they offer reassurance that, despite the fruitlessness of their search, the families have not abandoned their loved one. This may lessen their feelings of guilt and perhaps free them from the obligation of declaring the missing person dead in order to be able to perform a ceremony in his or her honour.

Rituals make it possible to pay tribute to the memory of the missing person.

Rituals provide an opportunity to receive support and to share the suffering that can go unnoticed because the families often do not have opportunities to express it.

Working with families has brought certain small-scale rituals to our attention. Some rely on the use, by priests, of magical-spiritual methods; others consist of organizing regular events or making offerings to the gods to ensure protection for their loved ones.

EXAMPLE

Religious belief occupies an important place in the lives of Muslims in the North Caucasus. They believe in pre-destination and in patiently accepting the will of God. Those who pass through difficult periods should, they say, recognize them as signs from God, and part of the journey to Paradise.

Prayers and religious rituals have an important role in easing suffering. If one of their relatives has disappeared, members of the family pray to God to look after him. This can solace families for a certain while. They can also organize religious rituals: one or more religious leaders gather in a circle and pray in a special way and read the Koran out loud. In addition to this, every Thursday night families organize a supper (*Sakh*) during which relations and neighbours are invited to remember the missing person and pray for his protection.

ICRC internal reports, North Caucasus, 2008

In Guatemala, food is set aside for the missing person on special days, in the hope that he or his spirit will come to consume it during the night. In case the food remains uneaten, the next morning the oldest member of the family has to eat it.

Other rituals in Guatemala include lighting candles and calling the spirits of the missing person in order to determine his whereabouts and/or fate.

ICRC interviews in Guatemala, 2008

INFORMATION SHEET 2.4* Why funerals are important

Religions differ in their explanations for deaths, but none of them considers it an end in itself; it is merely a stage before afterlife, rebirth or reincarnation.

In most religions, a person's destiny after death depends largely on the life he or she led, the way he or she died, and, importantly, on the rituals, ceremonies and prayers carried out by his or her family. Ensuring the peace of mind and the health of the living is an important reason for conducting funeral services properly.

Although funerals may vary in nature from culture to culture, their underlying meaning and the comfort they bring families may be considered to be universal. Funeral rites have many meanings. They exist not only to dispose of the body of the deceased with dignity but also to assist the surviving and even to consolidate social boundaries:

For the deceased: It is a belief common to many religions and cultures that funerals should be held to facilitate the passage of the dead from one world to another, to ensure reincarnation or to make certain that the soul of the dead does not come back and haunt the living.

For the individual (next of kin): For the individual, a funeral signifies a decisive separation from the deceased, an essential step without which the grieving process cannot begin.^{**} Without a funeral, people can find it difficult to admit their loss.

For the families: Funerals and ceremonies provide a form of public recognition that they are mourners and that their pain is shared by close relatives as well as by the community. The presence of other people betokens respect for the deceased, whose life is thus acknowledged and his or her memory preserved.

During the funeral, family members are allowed to express emotion openly. In certain parts of Africa, for example, the family's mourning is accompanied by dancing and singing. Elsewhere, people still seek the assistance of professional mourners. Despite their apparent theatricality, such ritualized expressions of personal suffering remain socially acceptable, as long as they are confined to the mourning period.

After the funeral, families go through a period of mourning whose duration varies from three days to one year. In many parts of the world, this period is governed by specific rules that guide the attitudes and behaviour of family members (according to their age, sex and relationship to the deceased). For example, in India, men are not permitted to shave or to wear certain clothes; they are also required to recite certain prayers and perform certain religious rituals in order not to dishonour the dead and, hence, to avoid being punished by them.

Socially: Funerals can be instrumental in creating social unity. By offering their condolences to the bereaved family, members of the community express solidarity and help to restore the balance between the two worlds (of the living and the dead). When someone is killed in the course of a conflict or a war, that person's funeral can be an occasion for retrospection and for expressing solidarity with him or her and his or her family.

* See also Marie-Frédérique Bacqué, *Apprivoiser la Mort* (Odile Jacob, 2003), *The Missing and their Families: Action to Resolve the Problem of People Unaccounted for as a Result of Armed Conflict or Internal Violence and to Assist their Families* (ICRC, Geneva, 2003) and *The Missing: Mourning Process and Commemoration* (ICRC, Geneva, 2002).

** In some cultures, when death occurs, the casket is left open for days in order to help the families understand that their loved one is no more a part of the living. In others, it is believed that when a person is not dignified through a proper burial, his spirit may go wandering and haunt the lives of the living for a long time.

INFORMATION SHEET 2.5 Psychological framework – Ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006)

WHAT CAN HELP RELATIVES TO LIVE WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

Finding meaning

- Through cultural beliefs (Destiny/Fate)
- Through spiritual acceptance of the nature and the cycle of life
- Through religious spirituality
- Through understanding and/or changes in perception

What helps?

- Naming the problem
- Understanding
- Normalizing emotions
- Exchanging perceptions/views/ideas with others
- Religion and spirituality
- Rituals
- Perceiving suffering as inevitable

Normalizing ambivalence

- By acknowledging the existence of ambivalent feelings, emotions, perceptions
- By accepting that such ambivalence is normal and can be managed
- By learning how to manage it and adapting to situations of ambiguity

What helps?

- Normalizing guilt and negative feelings
- Regaining personal agency
- Bringing ambivalent feelings out into the open
- Seeing conflict as positive
- Developing tolerance for tension
- Regaining feelings of control and self-esteem
- Re-investing physical and emotional energy in other persons and other activities

SOME THERAPEUTIC METHODS

Narrative (Hearing and telling)

- Individual, familial and communal sharing of narratives (e.g. stories) about the missing person, which:
 - contributes to the meaning-making process;
 - helps to balance conflicting ideas;
 - supports the process of healing.

Systemic (Sharing meanings)

- Therapy must include couples, families and the community, which:
 - facilitates sharing of meanings;
 - breaks the silence in the family;
 - creates connections through shared experiences;
 - stimulates family-social support networks.

Dialectical (Learning to live with conflicting ideas)

- Therapy must include the “both/and” approach (gone and not gone/her and not here), because:
 - it contributes to finding meaning;
 - it is necessary to work with “uncertainty”;
 - it helps to normalize ambivalence;
 - it reduces anxiety caused by ambiguity.

3. ACCOMPANYING FAMILIES

Accompaniment

INFORMATION

In this context, ‘accompaniment’ means ‘walking beside someone’ and being the link between families and the various persons and organizations providing the necessary support within the community.

- Accompaniment must always be adapted to the needs of the families of missing persons because it:
 - involves providing long-term support, as well as support during specific moments, such as the ante-mortem interview, the collection of blood samples, the recovery and viewing of the remains and/or personal belongings, the notification of death, and the handover of the body (*see Section 4, p. 124*);
 - is a way of building relationships based on trust and of creating a supportive environment able to address the various needs of the families.
- Accompaniment may be undertaken by persons who are motivated or willing to help and who understand the situation faced by the families.
- Accompaniers may be:
 - people who are in, or who have past experience of, the same situation;
 - members of active NGOs;
 - volunteers from National Societies;
 - important figures in the community.

1. What is accompaniment?

Accompaniment may be regarded as one aspect of the support provided by the community. It operates on the premise that families can be helped through empathetic relationships and mutual support. To accompany means to “**walk beside someone**” and **be supportive whenever necessary**.

The main goal of accompaniment is to strengthen the abilities of individuals and families to deal with difficulties related to the disappearance of their relatives (*see Section 2, p. 30*) and to eventually resume their social lives. They can do this by **making use of their own resources and those available** in the community – local and national – and by **creating a supportive network**.

This form of support differs from that provided by specialists who focus on particular problems (medical, legal, etc.). It attempts to address every aspect of the difficulties families face, by involving both professionals from various areas (forensics, law, health, social work) and ordinary people from the community.

Accompanying families does not call for a particular set of highly developed skills. It does require a sound understanding of the families’ situation and an aptitude for listening and for providing adequate support when needed.

In addition, accompaniment may also be of use to specialists in approaching the families – particularly mental-health specialists, as families are less likely to look for this type of support.

 [See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.7: Increasing families' ability to cope, p. 92.](#)

2. Why is accompaniment adapted to the needs of families?

There are a number of reasons why accompaniment is suitable for addressing the needs of families:

- ➔ families often need **long-term support**, as getting information about the fate of their missing relatives is often a very long and difficult process;
- ➔ experience shows that they are more likely to look for **support among people with whom they feel emotionally secure and to whom they feel close**, rather than among mental- health specialists;
- ➔ the effectiveness of accompaniment is most apparent during **specific moments** – for instance, at exhumations or during the identification of human remains;

 [See Section 4, Action Sheet 402: Accompanying families – From beginning to end, p. 142.](#)

- it is required when family members, trapped in the process of searching for their relative and consumed by worries, stop paying attention to their own needs and/or the needs of other close relatives. In such circumstances, constant and increasing support might help to relieve their distress and encourage them to look after themselves and the family;
- moreover, because of the relationships they forge with families, accompaniers are ideally placed to encourage family members facing specific difficulties to seek appropriate support.

3. Who may accompany the families of missing persons?

- People who are in, or who have past experience of, the same situation (e.g. members of family associations)
- National Societies
- ICRC field officers and/or delegates
- Various community resources, such as religious leaders, social and health workers, NGOs/associations (e.g. those dealing with youth, women, or human rights), public services
- Specialists willing to adapt specialized services so that they are better placed to approach the families

See Section 3, *Information Sheet 3.1: The accompanier's role*, p. 87;
and *Information Sheet 3.2: The accompanier: Minimum qualifications*, p. 87.

3.1 Family associations and people who are in, or who have past experience of, the same situation

Family members who have had, or are still having, to deal with the disappearance of one or several close relatives, usually set up family associations. Shared experiences bring people closer to each other. This can enhance the impact of accompaniment for the reasons listed below.

- **Understanding of suffering.** People who have undergone terrible ordeals have the unshakeable conviction that only someone who has endured the same experience can properly understand them. Knowing that the extent of their suffering has been fully grasped enables them to share it uninhibit-edly. This also helps people to form bonds of solidarity, which in turn, may alleviate their suffering and help them to eventually re-establish social ties.
- **Ending psychosocial isolation.** When they share their experiences with others, family members come to realize that they are not the only ones carrying such a burden. They can talk freely about personal experiences and, more importantly, mention their missing relative without fear of burdening others. Being able to express their distress at their relative's absence can have a significant impact on their ability to cope.
"I really like talking with other women. We seem to have created a family just by having the same problems. I say things here to them that I would not share with anyone else because nobody understands what I feel nor would they like to," says M. whose husband is still missing.
- **Fitting experiences into a broader perspective.** Discussing their experiences with others might enable families to fit them into a broader perspective, one that makes it easier for them to understand what has happened to them.
- **Reciprocity⁵ and mutual help,** which means recognizing each other's powers of endurance, learning from each other's experiences and providing advice or support.
- **Cooperative effort.** Forming family associations is one way for families to work together to obtain answers from the authorities and/or to get the support of civil society and public institutions. Participating in the work of family associations might also help families shake off the passivity of victims and become more proactive in joint efforts to bring the issue of missing persons to the fore.
- **Recreational activities.** By coming together, families give themselves an opportunity to take part in recreational activities, which they might not otherwise permit themselves for various reasons: the fear, for instance, that others might regard their behaviour as a sign of callous disregard or indifference to the fate of their missing relative. Recreational activities can be a useful distraction, providing families a respite from anxiety over their missing relative.

⁵ See also Guay, J., *Thérapie Brève et intervention du réseau, une approche intégrée*, École de Psychologie, Université Laval, Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1992.

3.2 Constraints related to the support provided by people in the same situation as those whom they have to help

Sharing similar emotional experiences can sometimes give people a false sense of confidence. It may lead them to forget to take into account the unique character of every experience and to believe that they know exactly what other families feel and think.

Moreover, accompaniers from family associations are liable to neglect their own need for support and to devote themselves entirely to helping others. While this can help them cope with the unfairness of their own situation, it can also lead to excessive, and perhaps unhealthy, involvement with others and to emotional exhaustion.

There is also the likelihood of family members becoming wholly preoccupied with their missing relative and with their distress at his or her disappearance. This is a danger to bear in mind: it can isolate them and prevent them from moving ahead.

EXAMPLE

In the Balkans, many families of missing persons were organized into associations. Although the commitment and activism of these organizations helped numerous families, interviews and workshops conducted afterwards revealed the following problems:

- because they were unaware of their own needs and straitened emotions, members of family associations did not encourage newcomers to attend to their own needs and to try to recover some sort of normality;
- a number of associations, convinced that nobody else cared for the families and although aware of their own limited ability to help, found it difficult to free themselves of some of the responsibilities that they had undertaken. Overburdened and exhausted, they burnt themselves out without finding any other resources to aid families;
- some of these associations, if not the majority, often found themselves being pulled in opposite directions: feeling indispensable and wishing to rid themselves of responsibilities that had become burdensome. The latter was an especially difficult task: many of them had chosen this course of action in order to cope with their own loss and grief;
- at times, they felt that matters beyond their control – difficulties in implementing laws related to missing persons or the absence altogether of such laws, the number of pending cases, and so on – undermined the impact of their small but important contributions.

These dangers can be averted, or their effects mitigated, as long as people are aware of them. Generally speaking, the support provided by the families of missing persons – through family associations or by other means – is essential and should be strengthened by the involvement of other actors from the community.

3.3 National Societies

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has longstanding experience and expertise in restoring family links when people are separated from one another during armed conflict or natural disasters. The Movement's Family Links Network is composed of the National Societies' tracing services, the tracing agencies in ICRC delegations and the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency in Geneva, which, together, address the needs of people who are without news of family members.

 See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.4: Restoring family links
and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, p. 89.

The Movement provides support in the form of a wide range of services designed to ease the suffering of people separated from their loved ones, such as arranging for the exchange of family news, tracing individuals, and collecting, managing and forwarding information on the dead.

In addition to helping to restore family links, the Movement's support can also take the following forms:

- **providing supportive listening** for families during home visits or other community-based activities. Supportive listening may be defined as "a balanced form of attentive, calm, connected and non-directive listening";
- **providing information** to families on procedures related to the search for their missing relative and on other services available in their community;
- **proposing a wide range of activities** aimed at ending the isolation of families and encouraging their reintegration into social life. This can be done through a number of psychosocial activities: summer camps, playrooms for children, basic vocational training, educational sessions, etc.;
- **networking**, which entails informing families about the services that are available and adapting those services to meet their needs;
- provision of **material relief**, either by distributing food and non-food items or by providing direct assistance for the development of micro-economic initiatives;
- **assisting at specific moments**, such as public events and the identification of human remains. While families can find solace in being surrounded by others who have had similar experiences, they can also be greatly comforted by the presence of persons attending to their immediate needs.

3.4 Other community resources

Considering the wide scope of families' needs and the kinds of action that they necessitate, the involvement of other resources/actors – religious leaders, social and health workers, NGOs (for youth, for women or for defending human rights) – and, of course, of the authorities, can broaden the assistance provided to families. The involvement of other actors is also a way of opening up the restricted circle – of the families of missing persons – to the entire community.

⌚ See Section 3, Action Sheet 319: *Mobilizing a support network*, p. 119.

Designing an accompaniment project

This part of the manual is meant to provide guidance for those (family associations, National Societies, NGOs and others), who want to develop a set of activities that address the needs of the families of missing persons.

Before they get started, interested local actors should be sensitized by someone with experience in the matter of missing persons, who should also help them define their area of interest and their motives, taking into account their human and material resources (as well as the availability of other resources within the community).

Family associations and other organizations must be very clear about their abilities and limitations and refrain from making commitments that they cannot keep. When they run into difficulties, they should inform the other organizations involved and strive to ensure that their role is taken over by someone else.

⌚ See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.5: *Designing a project*, p. 90.

1. Assess the families' situation

The role of an assessment is to obtain an understanding of a situation in order to identify the problems and their sources and consequences. The role of an assessment is not to determine whether a given activity is possible, but rather what it is needed.

The most obvious need of the families of missing persons is **to know the fate and whereabouts** of their relatives. However, these families can be confronted with several other difficulties or problems as well; and sometimes these go unheeded.

Every situation is unlike any other and determined by factors such as the political context, the socio-economic and cultural situation, the presence and types of external support mechanisms, and so on. Certain similarities notwithstanding, the situation of each family is unique and it must be expected that certain problems and ways of dealing with the disappearance will differ. Moreover, the nature of the families' difficulties may change over time: new problems may appear and older ones lessen or increase in severity.

A clear understanding of the situation of the families, based on their current needs and not on preconceived ideas, is needed in order to provide relevant, appropriate and effective assistance.

● PREPARE THE ASSESSMENT

An assessment must be properly planned: its reasons and focus, as well as the methods that will be used, given the specific nature of the context (including cultural factors), must be defined at the outset. It is important to decide what types of information will be gathered and how, the methods of analysis, and who will do what.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 301: Preparing the needs assessment, p. 93.

 See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.6: Basic rules of information management, p. 91.

● WHAT TO ASSESS?

It will be necessary to assess the overall context and to get a general understanding of the issue of missing persons. An assessment of the families must be carried out, to determine what they know and what their involvement was, or perhaps still is, in the search process. It is also necessary to understand the effects of the disappearance(s) on the families and the communities and to learn what their coping mechanisms are. Various factors related to socio-cultural attitudes, and to the political environment in which a disappearance has occurred, will influence the way families cope. These factors should be taken into account when assessing the families' needs. Finally, a stakeholder analysis must be carried out, and services for helping the families of the Missing assessed.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 302: Assessing the families' situation, p. 94.

● WHEN?

Because the needs of the families are not fixed and can change with time, there is no ideal period for conducting an assessment. It can be done just after the disappearance or years later.

1.1 Collect the data/information

There are several methods of collecting information. Some are quantitative, others qualitative. This distinction is sometimes expressed as 'hard data' and 'soft data.' However, the issue is not 'hard' versus 'soft,' but 'relevant and appropriate' versus 'irrelevant and inappropriate.' These methods are complementary and generally should be used in combination.

Quantitative information gives answers to questions such as how many, how often, how far, how high, how old? Qualitative information covers points such as how, when, who, where, which, what?

In doing an assessment the first step is to find out what information is already available from other sources (e.g. written reports) and then to see what further information needs to be collected and how this might be done. Studying a narrow question or a very specific problem in great depth may produce clear results, but it might leave other important issues and problems unexamined. On the other hand, gathering information on a large number of issues and problems may result in an assessment that has no focus; those conducting the assessment might find themselves in possession of a broad range of information, but all of it shallow.

While deciding on the method to adopt, some boundaries must be set on information collection. Should all the families of the missing be assessed or only some? Who else should be contacted? Should all problems be assessed in detail or only those being given priority? The focus should be on getting the best possible data, given the time and the resources available, and on remaining rigorous, open-minded and unbiased throughout the process.

In addition to considering what kind of information will be gathered, it is necessary to decide how it will be collected and documented. This implies deciding which methods will be used (e.g. surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, observation) and who will be included in the assessment.

There are various ways of selecting the people from whom information will be sought, but two are of particular importance: random sampling and purposive sampling.⁶ Random sampling typically depends on larger samples; its advantage is that the results can be expected to be representative of all the families in question.

⁶ In random sampling, every possible element of the population (village, individual or household) must have an equal chance of being selected; this may require efforts to counter result-distorting biases (access, gender, etc.) by using, for instance, stratified sampling. Purposive sampling, in this case, means deciding to interview either key informants or, importantly, vulnerable groups or individuals in order to obtain specific information.

The logic and power of purposive sampling derive from its emphasis on in-depth understanding: only information-rich cases are selected for it. The purposive approach focuses on a relatively small number of people among the families of the Missing and/or other key informants who have been identified as 'information-rich.' Key informants are people who have specific information about certain aspects of the population affected (e.g. health-care personnel, local and national government officials, members of women's groups, community leaders, religious leaders, NGOs, institutional staff, social workers). If you are aware of the views of key actors in the community, you will know where they stand with regard to the issues that the families face.

● FOCUS GROUPS⁷

Focus groups are, above all, **group discussions** that bring together persons from the same background (members of families from remote areas of the country, wives of missing persons, nurses, mothers of children below the age of five, etc.), or those who have been through similar experiences, in order to discuss specific subjects. They can be used for many purposes:

- to gather information/opinions/beliefs/habits/attitudes/practices/needs in relation to a particular subject
- to promote the sharing of opinion and discussion among the participants
- to gather sufficient information on which to base a project or to evaluate the results of one.

The information collected through focus groups can help to orient and increase the relevance and effectiveness of projects, especially when the participants are key informants and/or the families of missing persons themselves.

This method has a number of advantages for it allows the population affected – in this case, the families of missing persons – to take an active part in efforts to assist them and to feel that their views, on issues that concern them deeply, matter.

Nevertheless, there are also limitations: the results of a focus group must not be extrapolated. Additionally, it is not always possible for participants in focus groups to describe personal experiences.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 303: *Organize a focus group session, p. 96.*

● INTERVIEWS

Interviews are an essential part of any assessment. They necessitate certain decisions: whether to interview one or several family members, what questions to ask, and where and how to conduct them.

Unlike focus groups, interviews make it possible to pay more direct attention to individual experiences and to define and quantify, more precisely, specific issues and needs. They also give interviewees an opportunity to express themselves more freely and without being pressured by others' perceptions.

Individual interviews are recommended when sensitive questions may have to be posed: for example, in a complex family situation, or in a situation where the needs are linked to security/protection issues. Individual interviews may be necessary to identify differences within a family circle in coping with a disappearance; interviewing all the members of the family together may not allow individuals to express their personal difficulties in coping.

The following are two methods for conducting interviews:

- **Unstructured.** An unstructured interview allows an interviewer to develop an in-depth understanding of a family's needs during the course of a conversation.

An accompanier conducting an unstructured interview can come to understand the needs of family members without using a standard questionnaire. Listening to their stories during home visits or other encounters and letting them express their difficulties is a good way of understanding what they are going through and useful in deciding how to ease their suffering.

Even so, it is always helpful to take notes during the interview and to prepare beforehand a simple checklist for recording essential information (circumstances of disappearance, emotional state, family situation, income, etc.)

⁷ See also Jong, K. *Focus Group Discussion Guidelines*, MSF Holland (internal document), 2001 and Dawson, S., Manderson, L. *Le manuel des groupes focaux*, International Nutrition Foundation for Developing Countries (INFDC), Boston, 1993.

➔ **Directive and semi-structured (using questionnaires).** In directive and semi-structured interviews, interviewees are asked a set of pre-determined questions systematically. These questions may be open-ended – “**How do you think others perceive your situation?**” – or closed-ended – “**Do you think that others understand you?**” Open-ended questions are used mainly during semi-structured interviews in order to let the interviewees express personal concerns or views on various subjects.

EXAMPLE

A group made up of social workers, psychologists and members of family associations can be invited to respond to the following questions:

- What makes families reluctant to seek support – outside or within the inner circle?
- What can be done to encourage them to participate in a discussion with other families?
- What can be done to support men within the family?

In discussions of this kind, open-mindedness should be encouraged and the passing of moral judgments discouraged.

Answers to both kinds of question are/must be collected and documented accurately, and conclusions drawn from them subjected to further analysis.

Questions are framed in accordance with the needs to be assessed. For instance, in order to have a better understanding of the impact of disappearance on the social life of families, it is important to pose questions that probe the nature of their current relationship with their social environment, whether things changed after the disappearance, and the underlying reasons for these changes.

To enhance their credibility and relevance, questionnaires should take into account various categories of person in the population targeted (mothers and siblings of missing persons, relatives of missing soldiers or of missing civilians, families living in urban or rural areas, and so on). Responses will vary depending on experience. It may be an interesting exercise to compare perceptions, attitudes and personal experiences across categories.

● BRAINSTORMING

This is a technique in which a group of persons carry on an open conversation on a specific subject. The purpose of a brainstorming session is to generate analysis (retrospective or prospective) and ideas or solutions.

A session that focuses on issues related to the situation of the families or to disappearances should include people familiar with the subjects. Relatives of missing persons may participate in such discussions.

2. Analyse the information and identify priorities

Having collected all the information from different sources, it is time to process the data, put answers in categories and find patterns in the responses. This will allow you to identify the main problems that the families of the Missing face, the resources available to help them, and the gaps between needs and resources. The findings of the assessment are essential: without them, decisions cannot be taken.

First, you have to determine whether there is a need for action. If there is such a need, the information at your disposal will enable you to decide which problems to prioritize in your accompaniment project, taking into account their importance, your capacities, the existing resources, and potential constraints.

3. Draw up the accompaniment project

At this stage, you must determine the best ways to address the needs of the families in accordance with the priorities that have been set out.

3.1 Set objective(s)

An objective describes the result that you intend to bring about through the project, i.e. the improvements in the situation of the families of the Missing.

Objectives are usually of two kinds: general and specific.

A **general objective** refers to the entire project and describes the intended medium-term outcome: for example, improving the **psychosocial well-being of the families**. The accompaniment project may solve the problem or contribute to solving it.

A **specific objective** is a shorter-term objective that can be achieved more rapidly: for example, **the families of the Missing in area X will know about the process of searching within a certain pre-determined period of time after the disappearance**. A project has generally more than one specific objective, which are linked to the general objective. Each specific objective may have its associated strategy and activities.

The objectives must be S.M.A.R.T: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

3.2 Develop a strategy and a plan of action

Having set the objectives, you must now identify how they will be achieved concretely, by defining each step of the project. Details regarding each element of the programme have to be synthesized in a plan of action, which must include the following points:

- **The general objective and the specific objective(s).** What changes in the lives of the families of the Missing do we want to bring about? (*See Section 3.1*)
- **The strategy.** What are the most effective ways of reaching the objectives? How should we overcome constraints and take advantage of opportunities?
- **The activities.** Once the objectives and the strategy have been clarified you will be able to define and list the activities that must be carried out. In addition to what will be done, it is necessary to consider the following questions: How will the activities be set up? Who will do what? What is the sequence of the activities? And to what extent will they be connected to each other? What is the timeline for starting and completing activities?
- **Key indicators for monitoring activities and results**

The monitoring framework. You will also have to decide how to monitor the project and to prepare an action plan for this before implementation of the project gets under way: What will you monitor? How frequently? Who will be responsible for what? What indicators will you use? What methods for collecting and analysing the information? How will the information be used? For further information, see Section 4.

- **The resources needed.** What do we need to carry out the activities (human and financial resources, external actors, etc.)? What is the timeline?

It is necessary to define the resources necessary to carry out each activity: What human, material, technical and financial resources, and what logistical means do we need to implement and monitor the project? What is the time frame for each of these? The answers to these questions can result in the activities being altered, in line with the availability of resources.

Whether you are seeking funding or using funds already available, it is important to draft a budget for the project. A budget is necessary for transparent financial management.

⌚ *See Section 3, Action Sheet 304: Draw up a plan of action, p. 98.*

3.3 Writing a project proposal

A lucidly written project proposal could help the accompanier when presenting the rationale, purpose and the results envisaged of a given proposal. It would also help to make other actors aware of the impact of the disappearance of persons, and encourage them to participate in the implementation of activities; it may also help in raising funds.

⌚ *See Section 3, Action Sheet 305: Write a project proposal, p. 101.*

4. Monitor the activities and evaluate their effectiveness

4.1 Monitor and evaluate

Monitoring is a continuous and systematic process that should be conducted throughout the implementation of the project. There are various types of monitoring: for example, activity monitoring, results monitoring, situation monitoring and financial monitoring. Monitoring entails collecting, recording, analysing and communicating information and is carried out by those who manage/implement the project.

Activity monitoring entails checking on the outcomes and the results of these activities on a day-to-day basis. Activity monitoring also involves checking whether the families of the Missing have received the goods and/or services they have been told to expect (in terms of quantity and quality). **Results monitoring** checks progress in achieving the planned objectives of the project with the aim of providing early indicators. It is done mainly at the level of specific objectives and short-term outcomes. **Situation monitoring** entails keeping track of the changes in the context that may affect the project (its relevance, its implementation, its results), and of the project's effects on that context.

An evaluation is an independent, objective and systematic examination of the design, implementation and results of the project. Unlike monitoring, evaluations take place only at specific points during implementation or at the end of the project. Their scope is wider than that of monitoring. Evaluations make it possible to find answers to questions that have not been looked into and/or that require more complex data collection and analysis. They need careful preparation and are carried out by people who have not themselves been involved in designing and implementing the project.

Monitoring and evaluation make it possible to identify and assess potential problems and successes. They also make it possible to discover trends and thus provide a basis for corrective action to improve the design of the project, the way it is implemented and, therefore, the results for the families of the Missing.

Monitoring and evaluation can serve **three main purposes**:

- To support operational decision-making by providing information for those who are managing and implementing the project (e.g. for making the necessary adjustments)
- To learn and to benefit from what has been learnt, both within the project and beyond
- To assist internal and external reporting (to staff and management in your organization, the families of the Missing, authorities, other organizations, donors)

To avoid collecting a lot of information that is neither useful nor usable, it is important to consider, while developing a monitoring plan (or terms of reference for an evaluation), what you can and will find answers to and what the information that you intend to gather will be used for.

4.2 Carry out monitoring and perform an evaluation

For the purposes of evaluating activities, certain questions have to be answered: what (implementation of activities, immediate and long-term effects), how (indicators and tools), for whom (sources of information) and when (timing).

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 304: Draw up a plan of action – Example 2, p. 100.

4.3 Analyse information

- **Have all the activities been carried out as envisaged?**
E.g. number of information sessions organized compared with what was planned
- **Have as many persons been reached as expected?**
E.g. attendance rate during a group discussion or number of persons who received leaflets
- **Were the means/resources used adequate?**
E.g. sufficient logistical resources or sufficient number of instructors during training sessions
- **Have the activities contributed to reaching the set objective?**
E.g. families have made use of services they learnt about during the information sessions and are able to solve some of their problems; families have kept in touch with each other
E.g. families who attended the information sessions were well informed about the services available
- **Were there any unexpected results?**
E.g. the imbalance between the number of families who need information sessions and the number of them who attended the session suggests a low rate of participation; the various factors contributing to this result have to be identified
- **Have the activities and/or the way in which they were carried out met the expectations of the beneficiaries? In other words, what was the level of satisfaction?**

4.4 Report the results

At the end of an evaluation, you can summarize the following in a document that can be used internally or sent to donors or other interested parties:

- Needs/problems identified during the assessment

- Ways chosen to address them
- Types of activity implemented
- Their efficacy and potential effects on the families' situation
- The salient points
- Changes necessary for improving the effectiveness of the project/activities
- Difficulties encountered during the implementation of the activities

Main activities

Every response whose aim is to provide support for the relatives of missing persons must take into account the breadth of their needs and the variety of the resources needed to address them.

The following section outlines the main activities that have to be undertaken in order to provide accompaniment to families while they grapple with their painful situation.

These activities aim to make use of individual and communal resources and restore essential social ties.

 See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.7: Increasing families' ability to cope, p. 92.

Accompaniment implies

1. Providing supportive listening
2. Providing information to the families
3. Helping families to search for their missing relatives
4. Helping families to deal with legal and administrative issues
5. Organizing support groups in order to encourage families to share their experiences and support one another
6. Helping family members to reinvest in other areas (social and emotional)
7. Promoting communication within the family
8. Mobilizing the community and key persons within it (mediating between the families and the services available)
9. Raising public awareness and promoting public recognition of the issue of missing persons
10. Providing referrals to existing services and/or specialists

1. Providing supportive listening

What does supportive listening entail?

Supportive listening is crucial in establishing trustful relationships with the families regardless of whether that is taking place within the framework of a project. It implies the following:

- **having a non-judgmental attitude and showing respect and tolerance** for the way the families choose to cope with their situation. A listener/accompanier must not advise family members to "forget" or to "move on." The accompanier must respect their beliefs regarding the fate of their loved one and must listen respectfully when they express themselves on the subject. Listening to families does not mean that you must share their convictions. Providing them support does not mean that you are endorsing their belief that their missing relative is still alive or encouraging them to think so;
- **allowing them to express their emotions** and not belittling them;
- **having an empathetic attitude**, which helps the listener to share imaginatively in the feelings of the speaker;⁸
- **showing interest in and concern about what families are saying**: they must be able to believe in the commitment of the person offering help;
- **reassuring them that their reactions are normal**, including their need to move on;
- **jointly finding solutions that may help them feel better**;
- **providing them adequate information and advice** on particular problems;
- **respecting the confidentiality** of the information they provide: being tactful and discreet.

⁸ Being empathetic implies having sufficient emotional distance from the family's suffering in order to grasp their situation without being overwhelmed. It requires the listener to focus his or her attention on the way in which family members express what is happening to them and how they are trying to deal with it; it also requires the listener to help them to develop a better understanding of their situation without telling them what to feel and think.



Carla Molina/CRC

Quiche department, Guatemala. Families preparing to re-bury – with dignity and in accordance with custom – relatives whose bodies were recently identified.

Non-verbal language can provide information on the emotional state of the interviewee as well as about his or her relationship with the interviewer. Many important messages are conveyed through facial expressions, posture (the way a person is seated, for example), the physical proximity of the interviewer to the person being interviewed, appearance or bearing (excessive formality is likely to create a perhaps unhelpful distance), and tone of voice.

See Section 3, Action Sheet 306: Talking with family members, p. 101.

See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.3: Basic communication skills, p. 88.

INFORMATION

This kind of discussion/interview is not an interrogation. In such situations, the accompanier should listen and not try to fill silences with talk.

The first meeting with a family is an extremely significant moment and may influence the nature of future meetings.

The aim of supportive listening is not necessarily to release emotions.

Making someone accept the death of a family member is not the goal of listening, but helping families to cope with his or her absence by re-entering social and family life is.

Supportive listening does not imply having all the answers to the difficulties that families may express. The desperate plight of a family should not lead to discouragement or excessive involvement.

It is important to end the first encounter by indicating your availability for similar meetings in the future; it is important also not to conclude the conversation on a negative note.

Where should such a meeting take place ?

Because opportunities to have supportive discussions with family members may come about in various ways, the choice of meeting-place is not limited to any particular site.

However, in order to maximize the effectiveness of the meeting:

- the setting should be comfortable and secure enough to encourage persons to express themselves freely; both the listener and the family member(s) should feel at ease, undistracted by interruptions or the presence of eavesdroppers;
- encourage dialogue by placing yourself at the same level as the person or persons whom you are meeting. Do not set too many obstacles between yourselves (such as a desk). In other words, the setting should be, not excessively formal but, reassuring and if possible, familiar.

2. Providing information to the families

Information about various issues (see below) can be provided to the families either during discussions or at formal information sessions.

 [See Section 3, Action Sheet 307: Organizing information sessions, p. 103.](#)

General and legal Issues

- The rights of the missing person and of the families of missing persons
- The obligations of the authorities
- Existing procedures for searching for missing persons (e.g. registration, tracing, exhumation and identification)
- The existence of mechanisms for clarifying the fate of missing persons and for providing support for the families: how these work, what families can expect from them
- The necessity of registering the missing person and the procedures to follow
- Existing benefits/social assistance (e.g. pensions or other benefits) to which families are entitled
- Specific issues related to the identification process (exhumations, DNA, AMDC, etc.): how the process works

 [See Section 4: Accompanying families during the recovery and identification of human remains, p. 124.](#)

Practical measures

- Where to register a missing relative
- Where to receive information about the search process
- How to apply for/receive a declaration of absence or similar document
- How to apply for social benefits/assistance
- How to obtain the necessary legal/administrative documents
- How to obtain legal assistance

Other available resources

- When and where to get medical assistance and/or specialized support (e.g. psychological)
- Services/support available within their community (support from family associations, services provided by NGOs, etc.)

 [See Section 3: Mobilizing the community, p. 82.](#)

Practical advice

- Strategies that can help families cope with their current situation (taking steps to lessen their isolation, to re-enter familiar social circles, etc.)
- Helpful information on how family members may share their concerns with relatives (e.g. how to tell children about their missing father)

The religious perspective

- Proper conduct, as dictated by religion with regard to the declaration of death, for example
- Rituals related to the Missing

3. Helping families in the search process

The families of the Missing begin to search for their loved ones as soon as they realize their disappearance, and continue until they receive information on their fate and whereabouts. During this process, they often need help and guidance. There are a number of activities that can be undertaken in their support. ICRC delegations and the tracing services of National Societies have a special mandate in this regard, and special training as well.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 308: *Helping in the search process*, p. 104.

 See Section 3, Information Sheet 3.4: *Restoring family links and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, p. 89.

4. Helping families to tackle legal and administrative issues

Legal and administrative procedures related to the disappearance of a person are often difficult to carry out, especially in situations where the domestic legal framework is non-existent or incomplete (*see Section 2, p. 30*). Besides, families are often not aware of their rights or of the procedures, and the authorities sometimes not conscious of the difficulties they – the families – face. As they try to make their way through the regulations and procedures, to gain access to specific benefits (when available), most of the families will need help. Depending on the situation, this support may be comparatively simple (explanation and accompaniment) or more complex, requiring the help of a legal adviser.

Family associations and similar groups can organize themselves in order to lobby for the rights of the families of missing persons. Regional or international NGOs, such as the Netherlands Humanist Committee on Human Rights (HOM), the Federacion Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos – Desaparecidos (FEDEFAM) and the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), can help them to build capacity and widen their network in order to be more effective.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 309: *Help families to tackle legal/administrative issues*, p. 105.

EXAMPLE: Argentina and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is a unique organization of Argentine women who have become human rights activists in order to achieve a common goal. It was formed by women who had met each other in the course of trying to find their missing sons and daughters, abducted by agents of the Argentine government during the Dirty War (1976–1983) and afterwards, many among them, tortured and killed.

For over three decades, the Mothers have fought for the right to know the fate and the whereabouts of their children. They have sought to keep the memory and spirit of their disappeared children alive. The name of the organization comes from the Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires, where the bereaved mothers and grandmothers first gathered. They were a new form of protest or resistance. The public and collaborative nature of their activism was in stark contrast to the oppressiveness and silence of the government. Many victims of the Dirty War dealt with the stress by retreating within themselves. Their isolation from each other helped the government to maintain its hold over its terror-stricken citizenry. When the Mothers began to talk to each other and tell their stories, it was a major break from the habits of isolation and silence that had built up. Their refusal to be quiescent did more than combat the terrifying taciturnity of the government: their stories inspired other women to begin searching for their missing children and helped the movement to grow.

5. Organizing support groups

Support groups are different from focus groups and group information sessions. They are set up mainly to provide families with the opportunity and a favourable environment in which to gather to discuss their difficulties. Support groups may enable families to:

→ put an end to their emotional isolation by:

- sharing emotions and experiences without fear of being judged;
- restoring their sense of belonging to a group by talking to others who have had similar experiences (some persons will realize that they are not alone, that their situation is not singular);

→ **encourage mutual helpfulness by:**

- sharing information of practical value;
- exchanging ideas and advice about coping with their situation (e.g. one mother may suggest to another that she talk to her children about their missing father). Usually, advice from people who are or were in the same situation is taken in more easily;
- inspiring one another: for instance, some people may become hopeful when they see others successfully coping with their situation;

→ **strengthen personal resilience/coping capacities by:**

- helping others, participants being both helpers and beneficiaries. This might enable them to do away with their feelings of helplessness and of uselessness. It is well known that being able to help others is a good way of restoring one's own self-esteem;
- identifying their own needs and finding ways to address them;
- taking control of a situation by reaching a better understanding of it and finding ways to deal with it;
- rebuilding memories (for instance, by reminiscing fondly about the missing person);

→ **develop common strategies:**

- faced with a particular issue, group members can pool their ideas together to find adequate responses. They can also develop ideas for commemorating their loved ones.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 310: Organizing support groups, p. 106.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 311: Themes for group discussions, p. 110.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 312: Warm-up exercises, p. 111.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 313: Activities for support groups, p. 111.

CASE

"... I read in the newspaper that there were other people like me. I tried to contact some of them, to share experiences and to make sure I wasn't forgetting to do something I could be doing to find out what happened to my husband. I learned that the ICRC was organizing a meeting of the families of missing persons. I went there, stood in a corner, and shed tear after tear behind dark sunglasses. There were many people like me, all equally disturbed, unhappy and helpless, but at least someone was listening to us. They suggested that we join forces and form an association in order to make an impact, and we embraced this idea immediately.

I realized that we could make progress only in an organized manner – through contacts and by making proposals – and that there was nothing I could do all by myself (...) I was the first one to get down to work. I devoted all of my time and effort to the association, which I served as secretary-general for three years. It was therapeutic and meant a lot to me. I would have gone crazy if I hadn't kept myself busy. Also, thanks to my work I could keep abreast of things, and that helped me to adopt a constructive approach that could benefit both myself and others."

From "Olja's story" (ICRC website)

INFORMATION

Support groups can have adverse effects when they become sites of confrontation or when the sharing of experiences gives way to competitive comparisons of experience.

Some people may become too attached to the group or too dependent on it. These people may use the others in the group as a crutch rather than as supportive presences who will enable them to move on in their lives; and they may feel apprehensive about investing their energies in other social spheres. Separation from the group can be very distressing for those who become too dependent on it.

Groups cannot replace the support provided by professionals and they are not equally helpful for everyone.

6. Helping family members to reinvest in other areas (social and emotional)

Taking an interest in pleasurable activities may be difficult for many families, because they will not allow themselves to get on with their lives until the fate of their missing relatives has been clarified. For some of them, this may be a way of demonstrating their closeness to their missing relative.

Encouraging families to emerge from such emotional isolation may have positive results, which can reduce the risk of their suffering an emotional breakdown when their case is solved.

Families can invest in other areas of social life through vocational, recreational and/or artistic activities. Participation in such activities may help some individuals to share their problems and forge ties with others; it can also help to build their self-esteem.

Vocational activities

Vocational activities such as educational courses and income-generating pursuits help people to acquire new skills and the means to take on new responsibilities and roles.

It is not necessary, during such activities, to group together families with similar problems. In fact, vocational activities can provide families important opportunities to meet people whose experiences have been different from their own.

They might also enable families to reach out to other actors in the community and make them aware of the issue of missing persons.

● EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL COURSES

Learning new things helps people to develop new interests as well as the resources needed to cope with daily challenges.

A wide range of activities can be helpful in this regard:

- Literacy courses
- Learning a new language or computer skills
- Hairdressing, dressmaking, etc.
- Cooking classes
- Psychological education – learning more about child development, stress, etc.

● INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Such activities help to significantly reduce the vulnerability of families as well as the sense of powerlessness felt by many of them. Because they provide opportunities to generate income in some form, these activities can help families to maintain their economic self-sufficiency.

EXAMPLE

Following conflict (...), many women were left widowed or without information about their missing husbands. The war led to high unemployment affecting every household, which in turn eroded the traditional support given to widows by the community (...)

A local humanitarian organization initiated “work-at-home projects” for these women, involving the production of bags, crocheting of blankets, dressmaking, wool-spinning and knitting of jumpers, giving the women wheat flour as payment. The jute bags produced were used by the organization for food distribution and the knitted clothes and quilts were used for winter distributions.

The project proved successful and sustainable for three main reasons. Firstly, the “work-at-home” approach was a culturally acceptable way of allowing women to generate an income while meeting their other household obligations such as childcare. This allowed for the consistent and full participation of women. Secondly, skills training was incorporated into the project, enabling women to continue production independently of external support. Thirdly a “captive market” was available, as humanitarian organizations needed such items, so the women did not encounter

difficulties with respect to the sale of their produce. This demonstrates that where such a market does not exist, an important element of income-generating projects must be ensuring that there is sufficient local demand for the produce, that women have access to the markets and possess the skills to engage in trade.

From *Addressing the Needs of Women Affected by Armed Conflict: An ICRC Guidance Document*, ICRC, March 2004

Recreational activities

Recreational activities provide amusement and refresh body and mind. They help to ease the burden caused by a state of continuous stressfulness and to restore a sense of normality to people's lives. Such activities also encourage people to express feelings that can be shared with others in a supportive environment.

→ **Examples:** Regular gatherings (e.g. to celebrate birthdays), excursions, sports and leisure activities

Creative activities

"In a supportive environment, resolution through expression and containment in art frees creative energy necessary to deal with daily living ..."⁹

Creative activities make use of various artistic modes **to express personal experiences and to communicate feelings**. Transforming one's thoughts and emotions into a story, a drawing or into an artwork is one way to restore one's self-confidence and self-control:

"To use the arts expressively means going into our inner realms to discover feelings and express them through visual art, movement, sound, writing, or drama. Talking about our feelings is also an important way to express and discover ourselves meaningfully."¹⁰

When these activities are carried out in groups, they can afford amusement and encourage participants to share their feelings and experiences with one another.

→ **Examples:** Drawing and writing

Making sculptures

Creating collages (e.g. from photographs cut out of magazines)

Photography, music, singing, drama, dance, etc.

⌚ See Section 3, Action Sheet 315: *Organizing creative activities*, p. 113.

⌚ See Section 3, Action Sheet 316: *Drawing* and Action Sheet 317: *Writing/Narration*, pp. 114–117.

CASE

I have changed a lot after all these years of searching. Before I was very quiet, I hardly spoke and I was always hiding behind the others. Now I say straight out what I think and feel. I often take part in marches with other women who have gone through the same bitter experience of having someone in their family disappear. With them I discovered that I was not the only person to be suffering, but that many of us carry this tremendous sorrow in our hearts.

Thanks to them, however, I have learnt new skills to earn a living for my family. At first we painted pictures of the things we had been through: the horror of the violence, the grief felt in our villages, the funerals and some of our ancestors' customs related to death. As time passed our themes became more cheerful. We now paint pictures of the countryside where some of the main themes are nature, animals, work, farming and pastoral scenes.

From ICRC website (Peru)

⁹ Hill, M.A. *Healing Grief through Art: Art Therapy Bereavement Group Workshops* – <http://www.drawntogether.com>

¹⁰ Rogers, N. *The Path to Wholeness: Person-Centred Expressive Arts Therapy* – <http://www.psychotherapy.net>

7. Promoting communication within the family

- Encouraging open discussions within families about missing relatives and about individual experiences in order to develop people's ability to cope and to foster mutual understanding and mutual helpfulness
- Helping to set up rituals or ceremonies honouring the memory of missing relative(s)

Generally, an individual may expect to receive support within his or her family. However, that is not always possible: the nature of some families may be such that individuals within them find it difficult to express their deepest feelings and concerns to one another.

Sharing responsibilities (e.g. household chores) and emotional experiences and, above all, **open communication amongst family members** (to the extent this is permitted by socio-cultural practice) are likely to **reinforce the protective role of the family** and strengthen the links among its members. This can have a significant impact on the ability of family members to develop mutual understanding and helpfulness and on their ability to cope with challenging situations.

Open communication within the family can also lead to the development of **practices honouring the memory of the missing person**. For instance, celebrating the missing person's birthday can **create opportunities for family members to talk to one another openly, revive shared fond memories of their relative¹¹** and restore that person to his or her position within the family.

This may also have significant consequences for young people and children: it might cause them to feel a greater sense of inclusion within their families and they might come to understand a little more of what is happening around them.

Families that have accepted the death of their loved one may choose to mark the anniversary of the presumed/actual date of death by organizing a religious ceremony or a family gathering in honour of the deceased. They may also dedicate a special corner in the house to him or her (containing photos, personal effects, etc.).

An accompanier can facilitate communication within a family by:

- encouraging one or several family members to attend discussion groups or information sessions;
- carrying out home visits and talking with various members of the family;
- encouraging family members to share information and discuss sensitive issues (e.g. organizing ceremonies in memory of their missing relative);
- organizing mother-and-child workshops;
- arranging special occasions/traditional celebrations within the family.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 306: Talking with family members, p. 101.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 307: Organizing information sessions, p. 103.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 318: Helping families to organize symbolic/traditional/religious celebrations or rituals, p. 118.

8. Mobilizing the community

Mobilizing persons in the immediate environment

The families of missing persons need other forms of support besides that provided by family associations, NGOs, community groups, authorities or public bodies: they need the support of persons in their immediate social environment and compassion for and understanding of their situation. However, relatives, friends, neighbours and other members of their community may find this hard to do because their experiences are so different. They may not know how to comfort persons coping with the disappearance of a loved one. Some people may find it easier to tell the families of the Missing that their relative is still alive in order to feed their hopes and – in some cultures – to add to the missing person's 'good fate'; others may be divided between giving hope to families and convincing them to move on and put the past behind them. As a result, families may distance themselves from their immediate social environment, for it provides neither solace nor understanding.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 319: Mobilizing a support network, p. 119.

¹¹ Reviving shared memories does not mean raising hopes about the missing person's return. Mainly, it implies exchanging stories or memories linked to the missing person.

In fact, there are no right or wrong answers to the dilemmas faced by people in the families' milieu. Experience does show that what families usually want to hear from others is that **the way in which they choose to deal with their sorrow is understood and respected**. Therefore, people in their immediate social environment must heed the singularity of their experience; these people must neither urge families to forget nor must they advise them to passively accept their fate. Respecting the families' choice does not imply giving them false hopes.

Families can be greatly helped by people who can listen to their stories, who do not avoid talking about their situation, and who are not too inquisitive or judgemental.

In this regard, accompaniers can help to:

- promote understanding in the community by organizing awareness-raising activities on a small scale (neighbourhoods, villages, etc.), such as:
 - information sessions pertaining to the specific difficulties faced by the families;
 - door-to-door visits (with or without a family member);
 - workshops involving both the families of missing persons and members of the community;
- encourage the setting up of activities/events involving a broad variety of community members in order to reinforce social ties and prevent the families from becoming isolated.

Mobilizing key resources within the community

The mobilization of key persons and resources (traditional leaders and/or healers, religious and/or political leaders, health workers, local associations, etc.) in the community entails establishing a comprehensive network to which families can present their difficulties. Accompaniers must therefore be able to make these persons aware of the problems faced by families so that they may be persuaded to make themselves available. In addition, the families have to be encouraged to seek the community's help. The role of an accompanier is to be a **mediator between the families and the services available in the community**.

What services can be targeted by an accompanier and why?

Services	Purpose
The faith community (religious leaders, prayer groups, etc.) Traditional leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To inform families of the standpoint of religion or traditional beliefs on the issue of missing persons • To inspire and guide families to cope with their situation in accordance with their religious and/or traditional values • To find a place for the Missing in religious practice • To find a way for families to honour their loved ones (e.g. non-traditional funerals) • To introduce or re-establish practices such as incorporating a prayer for missing persons during masses or other rituals to help families feel that their experience is acknowledged by the community
Social services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To help families deal with issues of their status • To facilitate access for families to economic assistance • To find means to integrate families into a new environment (e.g. housing for refugees)
Health services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide adequate medical care that takes into consideration the ways in which the health of family members is affected by unremitting stress
Legal services (e.g. legal counsellors, human rights organizations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To advise families of their rights and to help them in obtaining benefits • To help in legal proceedings and legal procedures
Tracing services (public services, INGOs, National Societies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To inform families of the existing mechanisms for searching for missing persons • To assist them in their search
Mental-health professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To inform families (e.g. during information sessions) about the effects of unremitting stress and about ways of coping • To provide psychological support or other kinds of mental-health care
Social/educational centres, Local associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To involve family members in various activities • To provide an encouraging and supportive environment that will draw families out of their isolation • To help relatives of missing persons to invest in other areas of social and emotional life • To create opportunities for learning new skills or for engaging in income-generating activities

Sometimes, families find it difficult to make use of the services available to them. There may be various reasons for this:

- They are new to their environment and unaware of the services offered.
- They are not used to seeking or using such services.
- They are afraid or reluctant to seek support from specific services (e.g. public services or mental-health facilities) and they do not believe in the usefulness of such services.
- They will not allow themselves to feel better.

9. Raising awareness and promoting public recognition

- In this context, raising awareness means drawing the attention of the general public to the issue of missing persons and to the difficult situation of their relatives, in order to:
 - ensure that families are better understood and supported;
 - prevent missing persons from falling into oblivion.
- This can be achieved by arranging public events and ceremonies and/or through the media.

As has already been mentioned, absence of public recognition – that their relative is missing, or that he or she ever existed – compounds the suffering of family members.

"The most difficult thing to overcome is the lack of respect: nobody remembers my son; it is as if he never existed" – Father of a missing soldier

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 320: Raising public awareness, p. 120.

What does raising awareness mean?

Raising awareness means drawing the general public's attention to a specific issue in a way that fits the wishes of the people concerned. In this context it means speaking out on behalf of the families, about the problems they face, in order to evoke understanding and support.

How can awareness be raised?

The various issues faced by the families of missing persons can be presented to the general public on important occasions (e.g. the International Day of the Disappeared) and at public memorial ceremonies or through the media (TV, radio, newspapers), posters, artistic exhibitions, etc. The focus should be on the factors that make the situation of the families particularly difficult.

Through **public events or ceremonies**, the community can reassure family members that their missing relatives are not forgotten, that they are still a part of the society and have a place in its collective memory.

"I was really surprised how many people cared for us by being present at the public ceremony without having a missing person in the family. By their presence, I was able to understand the history of the war, and through that understand what might have happened to my father," says S., an 18-year-old.

These occasions may even be a source of pride. *"The heart is filled with pride when my son is remembered by the authorities,"* says the father of a missing soldier.

Moreover, public recognition may lessen families' guilt over the fate of their loved one; it may also ease the burden of feeling that they alone remember the missing person.

Public awareness can be a source of support: families may take solace in the fact that their situation and their suffering are widely acknowledged.

INFORMATION

- Active participation by families, in choosing messages and organizing events, should be encouraged.
- Events need not be organized on a large scale. Special occasions may be organized in small communities and the local media alerted to the fact.
- Any approach to the media should be made with this thought in mind: they provide an opportunity to bring key issues to the fore.
- It is important to make sure that the families understand the possible consequences of exposure to public opinion. Media interviews or exhibitions should be carried out only with the families' consent.



Nicosia, Cyprus, ICRC Central Tracing Agency office. Old woman searching for news of her siblings, missing since the beginning of hostilities.

Max Vaterlaus/ICRC

10. Providing referrals to existing services and/or specialists

- Health professionals
- Mental-health specialists
- Legal counsellors
- Social workers
- Family associations
- NGOs (women, human rights, etc.)
- Child-support structures
- National Societies, ICRC

Objective

Facilitating referral – helping families and individuals search for appropriate forms of support – is one of the most important aspects of accompaniment. Given the social or communal pressure and the wide variety of problems they face, families may need many kinds of external support. Steps may have to be taken to facilitate referrals when the person in question is not aware of the availability of support, or feels reluctant to approach certain services or has difficulty in gaining access to them. The type of support that is needed varies from one individual to another. Some may need expert assistance (mental-health professionals, lawyers, etc.) while others may get by with the support available within their immediate surroundings and by relying on their own strength and resilience.

Two examples:

● **LEGAL COUNSELLORS**

Depending on the legal problems that may arise and on the qualifications of the accompanier, it may be necessary for some families to seek professional legal advice.

A legal adviser is indispensable for defending the families' interests when a **judicial procedure** is involved. He or she can be very useful for doing the necessary legal spadework, for giving proper expression to the families' demands, for finding solutions to their legal problems and for drafting the documents required by the procedure.

However, the legal counsellor may not have all the answers; sometimes, the use of a lawyer will only further complicate the legal procedure in question. Lawyers generally charge for their services, but there are human rights NGOs that provide free legal assistance. These NGOs can also help families choose a legal counsellor suited to their needs; the accompanier may find it useful to be in regular contact with such organizations.

● MENTAL-HEALTH SPECIALISTS

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 321: Referral to a mental-health specialist, p. 121.

When psychological distress is seen to be significantly altering someone's daily life or endangering that person or others, referral to a mental-health specialist (a trained counsellor, a clinical psychologist or a psychiatrist) may be required.

Although signs of suffering may be apparent in many people, such referrals will be necessary for only a small percentage.

Referrals to mental-health specialists do not aim to encourage the sufferer to forget or to passively accept his or her situation; their purpose is to increase his or her ability to better understand and deal with personal feelings (sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, etc.) and to come to terms with the absence of the loved one gradually by developing constructive coping strategies. In addition to this, in most cases (except in emergencies), the decision to seek out a mental-health specialist should come from the person concerned.

However, several obstacles prevent people from contacting mental-health specialists:

- **Socio-cultural barriers** regarding psychological suffering or psychiatric diseases: suggesting help of this kind can be misunderstood and summarily rejected by some beneficiaries, because of their belief that requiring such assistance must mean only that they are mad.¹²
- In many areas, professionals may not be available, or they may not be sufficiently skilled and/or experienced in dealing with such issues.
- Participating in psychological support sessions – individual or group sessions – requires energy and time that many people may not have while they deal with a variety of problems (unemployment, displacement, lack of funds, transport problems, etc.).

What can the accompanier do?

Facilitating referral does not imply responsibility for ensuring access to benefits: it means guaranteeing that all appropriate steps will be taken to make possible the use of existing resources or services. If possible, the accompanier should activate the support services network and facilitate referrals on a regular basis.

A number of steps can be taken in this regard, such as:

- identifying resources and calling the appropriate service, and apprising them of the needs of the families, as these may not be known;
- providing the families with information on available services by, for instance, distributing a list of contact persons;
- ensuring that the families in question are physically able to reach and avail themselves of the necessary services: this might entail transporting them there and back, providing them with the funds necessary, accompanying them when they have to submit an application or visit a mental-health specialist, etc.

¹² In certain places, some families refuse to be referred to a mental-health specialist because they feel that these sessions are a trick whose aim is to convince them to admit the death of their family member, which they are not ready to do.

INFORMATION SHEET 3.1 The accompanier's role

No particular academic qualifications are required of an accompanier: what is necessary is to be **motivated, sympathetic and willing to help the families of the Missing**.

The role of people involved in accompanying the families of missing persons is to:

- listen to them when they tell their stories, or talk about their difficulties and fears;
- understand their needs, the way they cope with their situation, what they do and have done, what they know;
- inform them about the legal and administrative issues related to their specific situation;
- guide or refer them to available services when necessary;
- help them to regain a sense of normality, to reinvest in their social environment and to recover certain daily habits (e.g. attending or taking part in wedding ceremonies or other special social events);
- encourage self-reliance and mutual helpfulness by gently urging families to meet one another and to benefit from one another's experiences.

Before working with the families, an accompanier must pay heed to certain considerations:

It is unwise to have unrealistic expectations: for instance, it is unlikely that families will easily turn the page, as it were, and move on. There is no closure for ambiguous loss in relation to a missing person.

The psychosocial situation of families can be improved even if they are still in the dark about the fate of their relatives.

The families should be involved in the planning and organization of all activities that are set up for their benefit.

INFORMATION SHEET 3.2 The accompanier: Minimum qualifications

An accompanier should be someone who:

ATTITUDE

- is discreet and able to respect, when needed, the confidentiality of the information given
- can be calm and reassuring, especially while accompanying family members during specific moments
- is able to empathize with the families

SKILLS

- has sufficient patience and an aptitude for listening to the families
- is able to establish trustful relationships and open communication with them (see below – Information Sheet 3.3: Basic communication skills)
- can understand the specific needs of family members and provide suitable support, by using the existing resources / services
- is able to establish links with key actors within the community and sensitize them to the families' situation
- can handle the families' reactions without being overwhelmed by them

KNOWLEDGE

- knows his/her own abilities and limitations
- is sufficiently well-informed about cultural and religious issues
- understands the complications arising from the ambiguities of the situation
- has a basic grounding in the legal and social issues pertaining to the Missing and their families.

INFORMATION SHEET 3.3 Basic communication skills*

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

- Face the speaker
- Display an open posture; remember, especially, not to cross your arms
- Keep an appropriate distance, as required by the prevailing socio-cultural norms: proximity reflects interest but may also convey intimacy, informality or pushiness
- Make frequent and soft eye contact but be particularly aware of cultural practice in this regard
- Present a calm and relaxed appearance

LISTENING AND ASKING QUESTIONS

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood
- Concentrate on what is being said
- Show interest by responding non-verbally (e.g. nodding)
- Listen for the feelings and thoughts implicit in the words you are hearing
- Be aware of your own biases or values; they may distort what you hear
- Do not rehearse your answers while the other person is talking
- Do not interrupt, especially to correct mistakes or make points
- Do not direct the conversation excessively and/or unnecessarily contradict the speaker
- Pause to think before answering
- Use clarifying questions or statements to verify your impressions
- Avoid expressions of approval or disapproval, but indicate that you understand what is said
- Do not insist on having the last word
- Use open-ended questions to allow speakers to express themselves in their own way
- Ask for additional details, examples and impressions, when necessary

FEEDBACK

- Be sure that the person is ready to receive feedback
- Speak in calm tones, not in a high-pitched voice
- Describe rather than interpret
- Give sincere praise whenever possible, to support constructive coping. Try to make statements like: "That is very helpful to know" or "I would like to know more about that"

* Based on *Community-based Psychological Support: A Training Manual*, The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (1st ed., 2003)

INFORMATION SHEET 3.4 Restoring family links and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

RESTORING FAMILY LINKS (RFL)

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people are separated from their loved ones as a result of war or natural disaster. In these situations, families are torn apart, entire populations are displaced or forced into exile, the elderly are left behind, children are lost amidst the chaos, many people go missing and the dead may remain unidentified. Of all the suffering caused by war or natural disasters, perhaps the bitterest anguish stems from not knowing what has happened to a loved one. Everything possible must be done to establish their whereabouts, restore contact between them and if needed, reunite them.

Restoring family links means carrying out a range of activities that aim to prevent separation and disappearance, restore and maintain contact between family members, and clarify the fate of persons reported missing.

It involves:

- collecting information about persons who are missing, persons who have died, and vulnerable persons such as children separated from their families and persons deprived of their freedom;
- tracing persons unaccounted for;
- organizing the exchange of family news and the sending of documents when normal means of communication have broken down;
- organizing family reunifications and repatriations;
- issuing travel documents and attestations.

THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT: THE FAMILY LINKS NETWORK (FLN)

These activities are carried out by the worldwide Family Links Network, which consists of the tracing services of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the tracing agencies of ICRC delegations and the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency.

The Movement has longstanding experience and expertise in this area, as it is well placed to address the needs of people without news of their relatives. Every year, the ICRC and National Societies help hundreds of thousands of people (displaced persons, refugees, detainees and missing persons) to restore family links and to clarify the fate of missing relatives.

THE ICRC AND THE MISSING

In most situations of armed conflict and internal violence, the ICRC helps separated family members to communicate, using Red Cross messages, satellite and mobile phones, the Internet and other available means. It also collects information on missing persons and the circumstances under which they disappeared, in order to try to locate them in all possible places – prisons, hospitals, camps, etc. – or by addressing the authorities directly. The ICRC visits places of detention and records the identities of the detainees. This can play an important role in preventing disappearances. Through its assistance programmes, the ICRC is also trying to help the families of missing persons who find themselves in precarious situations. In recent years the ICRC has also developed expertise in forensic science. It offers advice and support to authorities in the management of the dead, and to those who endeavour to recover and identify human remains.

If you are looking for a relative and need help, you can contact:

- either the ICRC delegation in the country where you are
or
• the tracing service of the National Society in your country.

ICRC website: <http://www.familylinks.icrc.org>

INFORMATION SHEET 3.5 Designing a project

Step 1

INITIAL ASSESSMENT

What are the problems/needs?

Understand the situation of the families of missing persons, identify their problems and needs, map and assess the resources available to respond to those needs. It is important to take into account various levels of need: the individual, the family, a group of families.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 301: Preparing the needs assessment, p. 93.

Step 2

PRIORITIES

What has to be done?

Using the information collected, identify the main needs (prevalence, intensity) and define the priorities for your response according to your capacities, the existing resources and potential constraints.

Step 3

PROGRAMMING

How will it be done?

What are the best ways to address the needs?

Set **objectives** that can be achieved through appropriate **activities** implemented in accordance with a defined **strategy**.

Identify the resources required (human, financial, material, and logistical).

Define ways to monitor your activities.

Step 4

IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIVITIES

Monitor the implementation of the activities.

Supervise the staff involved.

Step 5

FOLLOW-UP AND EVALUATION

How were the activities undertaken?

What are the results?

Analyse the implementation of activities and evaluate the effects of the project on families' problems/needs. Identify the changes that are needed to improve activities or future projects.

INFORMATION SHEET 3.6 Basic rules of information management

WHY COLLECT INFORMATION?

Collecting and analysing information is essential for developing activities to benefit missing persons and their families, as it helps:

- to understand and analyse problems;
- to set priorities, define objectives and develop plans of action;
- in implementation: direct support and the provision of services to victims, searching for missing persons, informing the families and maintaining contact with them, contributing to establishing the truth, exerting public pressure in individual cases or in connection with a pattern of abuse, etc.;
- in monitoring and evaluation, and in maintaining archives to establish historic accountability.

WHAT IS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT?

Information management is the collective term for gathering, processing, analysing and storing data.

- Keep in mind that very often the data that are collected are personal, and sometimes they are very sensitive as well (medical files, ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, criminal prosecutions and convictions, DNA profiles, etc.); in some contexts, they may provide the basis for unlawful or arbitrary discrimination.

WHAT ARE THE RULES TO BE FOLLOWED?

1. Protect data and their owners

The first rule is that no one, under any circumstances whatsoever, should be harmed or exposed to risk: this means that the risks associated with information management, and with the protection of sensitive information and personal data, must be assessed.

The following procedures must be followed, as they are likely to provide adequate protection for beneficiaries/victims, enquirers, sources of information, and their families:

- define what may be considered sensitive information and design specific procedures to manage it;
- clearly define who can access the data collected – employees, beneficiaries, and third parties (family members, private enquirers, authorities) – and to what extent;
- people collecting and managing information should be trained. Organizations may seek advice from the ICRC;
- find a secure way to collect, process, transmit and store sensitive information and data;
- adopt rules for the publication of data, and also for how data may be transmitted to third parties or shared with them.

No personal data should be published or transmitted without the consent of the persons concerned or when it might be prejudicial to their interests or to those of their families. The consent of the persons concerned may be taken as given, particularly when the individual to whom the data relates cannot be reached and the collection of data is clearly in his or her best interests. The person or organization receiving the data must guarantee that they shall be processed in accordance with data protection rules. The applicable domestic law regulating the transfer or publication of data must be taken into account.

The information that is collected must be accurate and adequate in amount, but not excessive in relation to the purpose for which it is to be processed.

2. Define precisely what needs to be collected and how

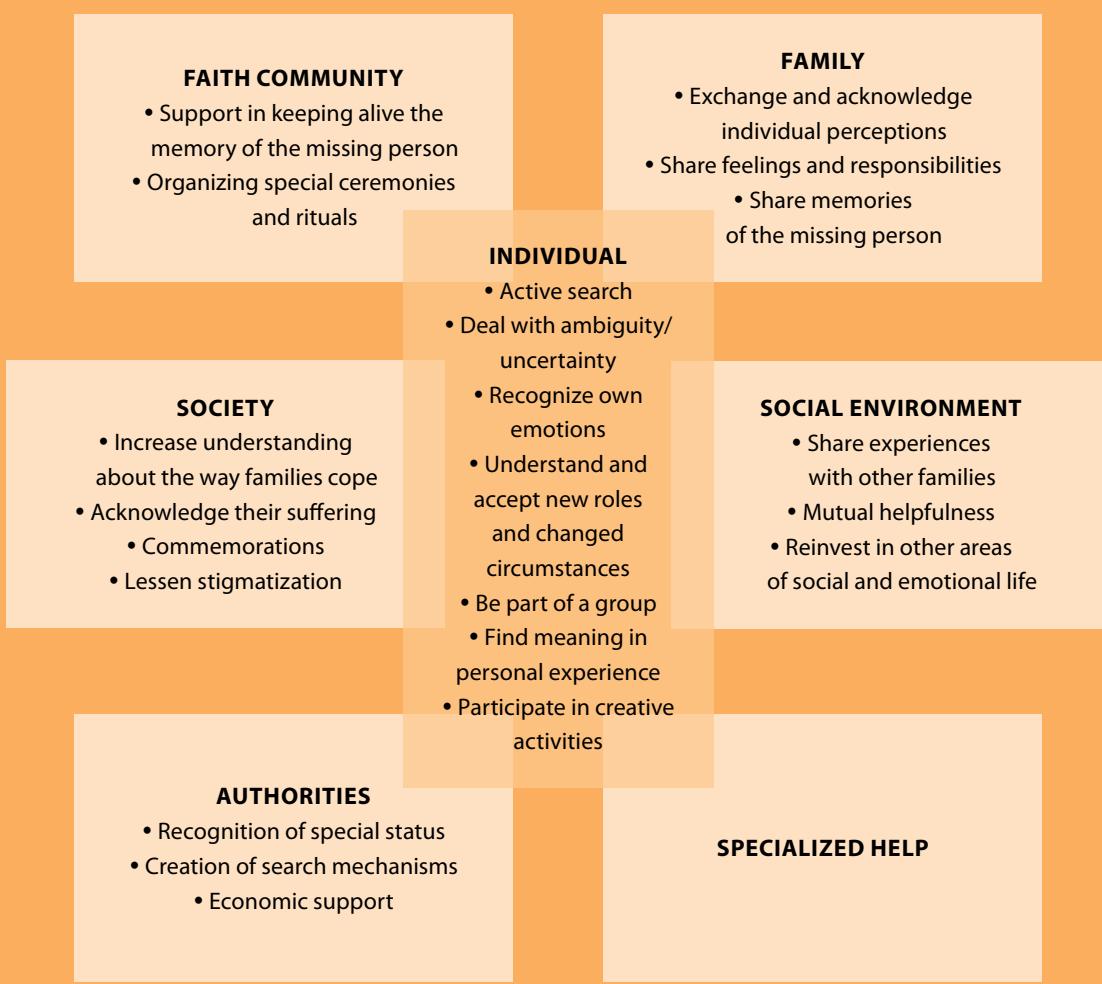
- The kind of information to be collected on the needs of the families of missing persons and of communities affected (see Action Sheets 301 and 302)
- Relevant information and key informants, as well as organizations or institutions that can help
- Methods and means of collecting information: how (e.g. bilateral or collective meetings with the people concerned, during medical activities), where (e.g. private homes, offices, hospitals, administrative services), who (e.g. volunteers, accompaniers)
- Document any action taken and the follow-up to it: e.g. copies of written representations and documents, reminders, minutes of meetings, replies from authorities, reports on the provision of services and individual follow-up

3. Set rules for data management

Set rules regarding the processing of data

- Cross-checking data and assessing their quality: information must be credible, coherent, objective, up-to-date, sufficiently detailed and, if possible, corroborated
- Communication channels
- Centralization of information and information processing, including paper and electronic filing
- Data registration/recording and sorting in relation to established objectives and in accordance with pre-defined tools for analysis; production of statistics and archiving

INFORMATION SHEET 3.7 Increasing families' ability to cope



Increased coping

ACTION SHEET 301 Preparing the needs assessment

GATHER PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

- Origins and scope of the problem
- Social organization and cultural characteristics of the people/communities in question (e.g. religion, belief system, customs, cultural perceptions of death / unnatural death / disappearance)
- General understanding of the circumstances surrounding disappearances
- Position of the authorities, existing legal framework
- Local resources providing support for the families (public services (legal, social, medical), associations, religious bodies, Red Cross office, etc.)

DEFINE YOUR ROLE – IDENTIFY YOUR CAPACITIES

- What is your purpose and where do your interests lie?
- Identify very precisely the areas in which you may have to develop capacity (adequately trained personnel, staff availability and/or motivation, material resources, funding, etc.)

SELECT THE AREAS TO BE ASSESSED

- Decide what aspects of the families' situation you want to assess: the way families are dealing with legal issues, their psychosocial situation, the problem of isolation, etc.
- Precisely what do you know? What type of information do you need?

IDENTIFY THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- Determine key informants: organizations, important figures in the community, the community in general, individuals (adults, children, men, women), etc.

CHOOSE AN APPROACH AND METHODS FOR COLLECTING INFORMATION

- Determine what methods you will be using (focus groups, interviews, brainstorming, etc.)
- Decide how you will contact the families or persons taking part in the assessment and how you will explain its goals to them
- Decide when and where the assessment will take place and how long it will last
- Decide whether you need partners for conducting the assessment

DEFINE THE SAMPLE

- Carefully select the persons you want to include in the focus groups or want to interview. Ensure that they belong to the category that you want to assess (e.g. mothers, siblings, widows) or that they can provide the information you need (social workers, NGO representatives, etc.).
- When you contact the persons for the assessment, explain its goals to them. They must be free to agree or to refuse to participate. Never force them.

LIST THE ISSUES – FRAME YOUR QUESTIONS

- What are the subjects that you want to discuss (especially in focus groups)?
- What questions are likely to be useful for identifying and/or understanding a given issue?
 - Closed-ended questions will enable you to perform a quantitative analysis afterwards.
 - Open-ended questions are useful in qualitative analyses.
 - Consult one or two key informants when drafting the questions – and/or for pre-testing – in order to check their usefulness and to find out how best to pose the questions.

ACTION SHEET 302 Assessing the families' situation

GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUE OF MISSING PERSONS IN A GIVEN CONTEXT

The following matters have to be examined:

- the nature of the conflict, the events that may have led to disappearances, violations of the law, the data available on missing persons (from various sources);
- the existing legal framework, in particular the existence of:
 - (1) a specific legal status granted by domestic law to missing persons, and associated benefits for the families;
 - (2) specific structures/mechanisms for clarifying the fate of missing persons and providing support for their families;
- the position of the authorities with regard to the search for missing persons and to the provision of support for the families;
- local attitudes and practices in relation to disappearances, attitudes to death, rituals, the situation of women, etc.;
- the institutional and community-based resources (traditional and other kinds) available.

 See Section 3, Action Sheet 301: Preparing the needs assessment, p. 93.

WHAT THE FAMILIES KNOW

- The circumstances of their relative's disappearance and his or her fate and whereabouts
- Their rights: to know the fate of their relative, to have access to information and to social services, to receive the remains of their loved ones, etc.
- The procedures to follow
- The existing mechanisms for clarifying the fate of missing persons and for providing support to their families
- The resources (family associations, the ICRC and National Societies) and services available

INVOLVEMENT OF FAMILIES IN THE SEARCH PROCESS

- Have they officially reported/declared the disappearance? If yes, to whom? If not, why not?
- Did they file a tracing request with the ICRC or a National Society?
- What other steps have they taken to find their missing relative? Have they sought information from formal and/or informal sources?
- What kinds of information have they already obtained?
From whom, and are their sources reliable?

ACCESS TO AND USE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

- What are the main difficulties encountered by families during the search process (administrative obstacles, inability to provide documents, fear, threats, etc.)?
- Are they in contact with an association or similar body, or with a public service?
If yes, which one(s) and what kind of support did they ask for and receive?
If not, why not? Is it because of lack of information or is there some other reason?
- Do they participate in activities (educational, vocational) offered by other organizations or bodies?

ECONOMIC SITUATION

- What kind of major economic difficulties has the family faced since the disappearance?
- Do their current sources of income (if any) cover their basic needs?
- Are they entitled to any social support? Did they obtain it?
- Did they receive aid in any other form?
- Do they have any idea how to improve their situation (e.g. learning new skills)?

PSYCHOSOCIAL DIFFICULTIES

- **Personal psychological state***

- What, according to person interviewed, happened to the missing relative?
- What are the effects of the disappearance, and of the absence, of the loved one on family members?
- Does he or she think or worry constantly about the missing person?
- Does he or she feel consumed by sadness, helplessness, despair and fatigue?
- Does he or she have feelings of guilt and anger? Does he or she express these feelings?
- Do these thoughts, worries and feelings prevent him or her from sleeping normally, from concentrating and from doing what he or she usually does every day (working, taking care of other family members, taking care of the house, meeting friends, participating in religious or social events, etc.)?
- Has he or she developed any physical ailments since the disappearance?
- Has, or is, he or she consulted or still consulting a health or mental-health professional?
- What kind of support would help him or her to feel better?

- **Communication and sharing within the family circle**

- Who is following the case of the missing relative? Do family members share responsibilities and the information that they obtain?
- Do family members talk to one another about their experiences or difficulties?
- Do family members share their memories of the missing person, or stories about him or her? Or is the topic avoided?
- Are the children/adolescents within the family aware of the situation? What are they told and how?
- Are there special practices within the family whose express purpose is remembering the missing person?
- Do the children/adolescents participate in them?
- What, in their view, helps or may help them to communicate better with one another?

- **Relations with the social environment**

- What major changes have occurred in their social life? Are they still in contact with their previous social circle or have those links been cut?
- Are there people with whom the family can share their problems? Or do they feel estranged from their community?
- Do they feel any pressure from others to move on? Or do they feel that others understand their pain?
- Do they know other families? Do they meet with them? How often? What do they discuss?
- If not, are they interested in meeting with other families? Why?
- Do they participate in events related to the issue of missing persons (demonstrations, commemorations or other social gatherings)? Have they taken part in a single event of the kind? If not, why not? Do they think that such events are helpful?

PREPAREDNESS FOR RECOVERY AND IDENTIFICATION OF HUMAN REMAINS

(IF IT IS RELEVANT TO THE CONTEXT)

- Do they need to be in contact with other families to understand better how this is done?
- Do they need explanations from professionals (forensic specialists, pathologists, mental-health specialists, legal advisers) about their rights or about other issues in connection with the handover of their loved one's remains?

* Questions about an individual's psychological condition should be posed carefully when the questioner is not a mental-health professional. The purpose of these questions is not diagnostic; it is to form some idea of the extent of someone's distress, in order, for instance, to refer him or her to a specialist if necessary.

ACTION SHEET 303 Organize a focus group session

PREPARING THE SESSION

- **Choose the issue**
- **Choose the group**
 - Age and educational background are important criteria. In some instances, a homogeneous group is preferable. Be careful not to choose persons who are unwilling to talk in the presence of others (for example, wives or mothers-in-law of missing persons).
 - We recommend organizing small groups (no more than ten participants): this will make for freer exchanges, in which everybody is able to express his or her point of view.
- **Frame the questions**
- **Choose the facilitator**
 - The facilitator should be someone who can earn the respect of the group.
 - It is advisable for him or her to be assisted by someone who can take notes during the session.

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP

- **Welcome the participants**
- **Explain**
 - Your role
 - Why those particular participants have been chosen
 - Why they are there
 - Why their opinion is important
- **Introduce the topic(s) to be discussed**
 - There are no restrictions on what may be discussed in focus group sessions.
 - Examples:
 - Theme 1:** The way that missing persons should be remembered, which may lead to a project for organizing commemorative events, for instance
 - Theme 2:** The effects of social attitudes on the daily lives of the families
- **Establish trust among the participants**
 - Introduce them to one another
- **Encourage the discussion**
 - By asking questions, reformulating ideas, soliciting opinions
- **Include everyone in the discussion**
 - Do not let one person dominate the discussion
- **Keep the discussions focused**
 - On the topic

AT THE END OF THE SESSION

- Wrap up by reiterating the main ideas or issues
- Thank the participants for their valuable contributions
- Remind them how the information that has been collected may be used

REPORTING FORMAT

Date _____

Location _____

Name of the facilitator _____

Information about the participants _____

Who participated _____

Families or key members of the community _____

Age group (if relevant) _____

Relationship to the missing persons (mothers, spouses, etc.) _____

Number of participants _____

RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: AN EXAMPLE

	Topics discussed	What are the problems?	What were the participants' explanations for these problems?	What solutions did the participants suggest?
Example	Access for families to the existing services	Families are not informed about the service Even when they are, they are reluctant to use them	They are in an unfamiliar environment They are reluctant to use the services because they are afraid that people do not understand their concerns	Circulating information Meeting with resource persons and making them aware of the problems faced by the families
Example	Absence of dialogue within the family about the missing person	Family members do not share their emotional difficulties and responsibilities, which may lead to conflicts and misunderstandings	Fear of hurting one another Children are not considered sufficiently mature Difficulties in talking about their emotions	Make families aware of the positive effects of sharing emotional and other issues with one another Organize recreational activities for the entire family, including the males Organize group discussions with other families that are dealing with similar situations Organize workshops to help mothers to talk to their children about their missing relative

ACTION SHEET 304 Draw up a plan of action

Example 1

Problem/Need identified	A hundred families from districts A, B, and C are not sufficiently informed of the existence of support services or feel reluctant to ask for support				
Specific objective	To ensure that families know about the resources (social, medical, legal) available in each district, know what services are provided, and use them when needed				
Strategy	Information sessions and leaflets				
Activities	Location	Time frame	Material resources needed	Human resources needed	Budget
Prepare and implement information sessions for key informants/ target services (social and medical services, legal advisers, etc.)	Medical centres in districts A, B, and C Community services centres in the same districts	February (3 one-day sessions; 10 persons in each session)	Meeting room (minimum capacity of 15 persons) Lunch and refreshments Flip chart Stationery	Accompaniers Facilitator Volunteers Translator (if required)	Transportation costs Rent for room Food, drinks
Produce a leaflet containing pertinent information and contact details	NA	End of February 150 leaflets	Paper, printer	Translator (if required)	Cost of paper, ink printer, etc.
Prepare and implement information sessions for the families of missing persons	Community services centres in districts A, B, and C	March – April (10 one-day sessions; 10 persons in each session)	Meeting room (minimum capacity of 15 persons) Lunch and refreshments Flip chart Stationery	Accompaniers Facilitator Key informants Translator (if required)	Transportation costs Rent for room Food, drinks
Facilitate visits to support services when needed		To be determined			Transportation and service costs
Monitoring indicators (qualitative and quantitative)					
Number of families who attended the information sessions					
Number of families who contacted support services after the sessions					

ACTION SHEET 304 Draw up a plan of action (cont.) – Example 2

Problem/Need identified	Family members worry endlessly about their relatives and isolate themselves from the community				
Specific objective	1. To put these families in touch with others who have had similar experiences, so that they may share their problems or difficulties 2. To ensure that these families are able to reinvest in other areas of social life				
Strategy	Group discussions and outdoor activities				
Activities	Location	Time frame	Material resources needed	Human resources needed	Budget
Gather information about existing activities or communal events (religious, traditional, etc.)	National Society office Community centre	September-November	Room (capacity of 10 persons) Light refreshments	Accompanier Activity provider	Staff costs (Transportation services, etc.)
Organize six group discussions focusing on various common issues faced by family members Information regarding existing activities /communal events will also be shared with groups at the end of the sessions The selection and the preparation of three outdoor activities should be discussed within the groups	National Society office Community centre	January-March	Room (capacity of 10 persons) Light refreshments	Accompanier Key informants (if needed)	Rent for six rooms Transport Food
Organize three outdoor activities for three groups, each consisting of 15 persons	To be determined	January-March	Will depend on the activity	Accompaniers	Transport Lunch and other costs
Monitoring indicators (qualitative and quantitative)					
Number of participants (quantitative)					
Level of satisfaction					
Attendance rate and/or level of involvement (qualitative: use scales)					

ACTION SHEET 305 Write a project proposal

1. Title of the project
2. How many people will benefit from the project, and who will they be?
3. What are the problems that this particular group face and how should they be ranked by priority? (Explain why)
4. How have these problems been identified? (Focus group, observation, etc.)
5. What are you hoping to achieve? (Objectives)
6. How are you going to achieve them? (Strategy)
7. What kinds of activity will help you reach your objectives? (Linked to the strategy)
8. What are the resources (internal and external) needed to develop these activities?
9. What are the costs involved? (Provide detailed information for each activity)
10. How will you know that you have reached your objectives?
11. What are the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the project, including partners?
12. Time frames

ACTION SHEET 306 Talking with family members

STARTING UP

Your task as an accompanier is to put the person at ease

- **Introduce yourself and your organization and explain your role**

The accompanier should explain, very clearly, the purpose of any discussion or interview that he or she wants to conduct. Defining your role at the outset will enable you to establish your reliability for the present and for future occasions.

- **Set aside time for informal conversation**

Talking about everyday things can be a way of establishing a relationship of trust and of showing the persons you are talking with that your interest in them is not merely professional, that you understand that being the relative of a missing person is only one aspect of their lives.

- **Ask the person if it is a good time to talk**

- **Ask for privacy when needed and if appropriate**

Family members (especially men) may find it difficult to discuss personal issues in front of others or family-related issues if their relatives are not present (especially wives who may need the presence of their in-laws). However, sometimes a face-to-face conversation may be necessary to allow the person to talk more freely about sensitive subjects and about himself or herself.

Make sure that children are not present if you plan to discuss delicate or sensitive issues.

FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW OR DISCUSSION WITH THE FAMILY

Depending on your purpose, always bear in mind the following rules:

Be...

- **Be open and willing to listen** and avoid showing signs of discomfort or of wanting to change the subject. Obvious attempts to change the subject may lead the speaker or interviewee to think that he or she is becoming burdensome and an imposition.
- **Never show lack of interest in someone's story** because it sounds familiar to you.
- **Be honest** in your answers.
- **Be conscious of your body language.**
- **Be calm and reassuring throughout.**

ACTION SHEET 306 Talking with family members (cont.)

- **Demonstrate your supportiveness by:**
 - encouraging the family member to express his or her needs even if you cannot address all of them; signs of responsiveness – phrases like “I see,” “I understand,” and “That is interesting” – may reassure the interviewee that you are listening closely;
 - giving positive feedback about what someone has already done through statements like “You seem to have done a lot already.”
- **Show that you are genuinely interested** by rephrasing what they say, in order to verify that you have understood them correctly: use phrases like “If I understand you correctly, what you are saying is that...”

Avoid...

- **trying to convert them to your way of thinking:** do not say things like “You have to accept reality.” Try instead to find out more about what they think and how they make sense of their experiences. Showing understanding, rather than approval or disapproval of their ways, is likely to be more useful;
- **anticipating what someone is about to say:** interjecting with statements like “I know what you are going to say” or completing their thoughts or sentences. Instead, give the speaker the freedom to express his or her thoughts and feelings without interruption;
- **being defensive:** a listener or accompanier must be able to cope with emotional reactions, such as anger, without taking them personally. It may be that this is the first opportunity the speaker has had of airing his or her feelings, after long years of waiting. It is not at all unusual for someone to vent his or her anger at the first person who shows some interest. In such instances, defensiveness – “I am only trying to do my job!” – would be unhelpful; it is wiser to show understanding: “After what you have been through, you have every right to be angry.”

Identify...

- **immediate needs** by listening closely;
- **potential resources** in the immediate social environment, resources available within the family unit and the personal resources of individuals;
- **possibilities for change or improvement:**
 - everyone is equipped with the necessary resources to help himself or herself;
 - questions like “Are there things you could do to make yourself feel better?” can help someone identify the resources available to him or her, and enable that person to act decisively.

Inform...

It is helpful during meetings with families to take time to explain the legal procedures involved and other practical issues. It may be useful to prepare leaflets for this purpose. While providing information, an accompanier must not forget to reiterate constantly that the families are not required to rush into taking any decisions or distressing steps, even though these may be necessary.

Advise...

- **Family members should be urged to seek support** from existing services (social, public, associative, etc.) when appropriate. It is vitally important that the accompanier be aware of the services available in their area.
- **They should be encouraged to communicate with other family members** about their missing relative, as well as about the effects of the disappearance on them.
- **It should be suggested to them that the family dynamic be altered in acknowledgement of the absence of the missing relative**, by redistributing responsibilities and tasks within the family circle.
- **Recommend that they resume their participation in religious ceremonies or in important family events and social occasions**, in order to remain close to their community and to restore a sense of normality to their lives.

For many family members, it may be important to hear from an outsider that it is acceptable and normal to move on. This may lessen the guilt that some of them may feel – at betraying their missing relative – if they do decide to move on.

ACTION SHEET 307 Organizing information sessions

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF CONVEYING INFORMATION TO FAMILIES?

- To add to what they know, or to make them newly aware, of various procedures as well as of their rights
- To encourage them to be more active and to take advantage of the help or support that is available
- To reduce the stress caused by their difficulties (material, emotional, etc.)
- To encourage them to think about their own needs

WHO CAN PROVIDE INFORMATION?

- An **accompanier** can pass on whatever he or she knows and also identify areas in which information is lacking or those for which it is available
- **Specialists:** for instance, a lawyer can be invited to shed light on the legal aspects of a family's situation
- **Key religious figures** within the community: this would also give family members an opportunity to establish a connection with important members of the community
- **National NGOs** (including family associations and the National Society); **international organizations or representatives of the local authorities** can apprise the families of their rights and explain the implementation measures to them
- **Other family members** who are willing to share what they know

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

- Identify the main areas in which the families you have met lack information
- Decide who is most qualified to provide information
- List the things you are hoping to achieve
- Look into potential meeting-places (where the families are likely to feel comfortable, how they will get there, etc.)
- In case you invite someone else to address the families (a lawyer, a religious leader, etc.), meet with that person beforehand and explain the goals of the session that you are organizing
- Try to make sure that nothing in the session will significantly contradict anything you have said before
- If possible, prepare handouts (e.g. brochures, lists of contacts) in advance

STARTING THE SESSION

- Introduce yourself, explain your role and describe the objectives of the session
 - Introduce invited outsiders, if any, and their role
 - If it is a small group, ask all present to briefly introduce themselves
 - Introduce the topic and explain why it was chosen
 - **During the sessions, make sure that:**
 - everything is explained clearly in language that everyone can understand;
 - there is time for questions;
 - participants can make contributions from their own experiences and in keeping with the subject of the session, and that they are able to express their views as much as possible.
-  See Section 3, Action Sheet 303: Organize a focus group session, p. 96.

AT THE END OF THE SESSION

- Make sure that the participants have understood all that was said; you might want to ask each of them to frame a sentence saying what they learnt or one summarizing the main messages of the meeting
- Collect suggestions for future sessions
- Distribute the brochures and lists of contacts
- Make it clear that you will be available to answer any questions they might have in the future, and/or to take part in activities

ACTION SHEET 308 Helping in the search process

COLLECT INFORMATION

Collect information:

- on the missing person, and participate in the collection of ante-mortem data ([see Section 3, Information Sheet 3.6: Basic rules of information management, p. 91](#));
- on the role and activities of the ICRC and on the Movement's RFL network;
- on existing mechanisms for searching for missing persons;
- on the processes for exhumation and identification.

PROVIDE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Inform the families about:

- the mechanisms available for searching for missing persons;
- the processes for exhumation and identification ([see Section 4, p. 124](#)).

Be realistic: warn the families about the possibility of having to pay bribes, the prevalence of rumours, and what they can reasonably hope for; establishing adequate measures for clarifying the fate of missing persons can take a long time – years and sometimes decades.

PERSUADE AUTHORITIES

Encourage the authorities and stakeholders to take a position on the issue of missing persons, to affirm their commitment to tackling the issue (including establishing the fate and whereabouts of missing persons) and to providing support for the families. In particular, urge them to:

- provide timely, clear, reliable, complete, honest and transparent information on the fate of missing persons;
- allow families to have access to existing evidence (photographs, records, documents, etc.);
- recover, identify and return mortal remains to the families;
- return any personal belongings that may still be in their possession;
- promote the participation of families in the recovery process and the sharing of information with them.

MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH PERSONS RESPONSIBLE

FOR ADDRESSING THE FATE OF THE MISSING

Be in constant communication with those persons formally responsible for the process of clarifying the fate of the Missing, and continue to speak to them in behalf of the families. These persons – indeed the process itself – should involve the families of the Missing and keep them informed of:

- their work, their difficulties, and their results;
- the probability of finding the missing persons alive, or of finding and identifying their remains;
- the time frame;
- the possibility of obtaining reparations and of holding those who are responsible accountable for their acts.

ACTION SHEET 309 Help families to tackle legal/administrative issues

COLLECT INFORMATION

- Collect information and familiarize yourself with domestic laws, regulations and procedures pertaining to missing persons and their families. You can do so by:
 - seeking the assistance of a legal professional or an NGO;
 - identifying all the NGOs providing legal assistance.
- Understand the needs of the families with regard to legal and administrative issues
(See Section 2, p. 30)
- Identify and register the families who may need legal and/or economic support
- Identify all the resources and social benefits available

ENCOURAGE FAMILIES TO REGISTER THEIR MISSING RELATIVES

- If missing persons have a formal legal status, encourage the families to register the disappearance of their relatives and to apply for the social benefits available
- Explain the objective and procedures
 - Why it is important
 - Where and how to report
 - What information is needed, what a certificate of absence is
- Find out whether the families are apprehensive that they will be treated badly or received with hostility and why
- If necessary, accompany the relative (s) of the missing person during the registration process

PROVIDE INFORMATION

- Provide information about the benefits of registering missing persons and about the procedures
- Design a leaflet that provides the families with information on their rights, the procedures to follow and the resources available; the aim is to inform them of the services available and to facilitate their access to these services
 - Ensure that the information you provide is updated
 - Contact information should include telephone numbers and/or addresses of competent and qualified providers of services

FACILITATE REFERRALS

- Facilitate referrals and monitor the process (which may involve administrative, practical or political obstacles, as well as other kinds of difficulty).

Facilitating a referral ensures that all the steps necessary, to apply for assistance and social benefits, will be taken.
- Establish an operational referral network. Where national service providers of quality exist, they should be preferred to international service providers. In this regard, the least that can be done is to provide contact information about the services that are available.
- Facilitating referrals involves ensuring that the persons in question are physically able to reach and avail themselves of the necessary services. When persons have no access to these services this may involve taking action, such as:
 - calling the service and explaining the situation;
 - transporting the persons there and back;
 - providing them with the funds necessary to pay for the service;
 - accompanying them when they have to submit an application.

INFORM AND PERSUADE AUTHORITIES

- Inform the authorities of the families' needs and encourage them to provide the necessary assistance
 - Advocate the families' cause to ensure that their right to know is respected and that they have access to the support they need
 - Encourage the authorities to ensure that existing laws are followed
 - Encourage the authorities to provide support to the families according to need
 - Encourage the authorities to promote equality of treatment in the distribution of benefits to the families (including civilians)
- Contact organizations that are designing tangible projects to help the families
- Organize and facilitate meetings, raise awareness and discuss these issues in order to stimulate more action

ACTION SHEET 310 Organizing support groups

Purpose

- To make the families understand that they are not alone
- To reinforce their coping mechanisms by sharing activities and encouraging mutual helpfulness and the free exchange of views and experiences

The facilitators

Depending on the objectives, any of the following may be facilitators (one or two may be used):

- **The accompaniers**
- **Key external actors**, depending on the subject to be discussed (for instance, mental-health professionals in case the objective is therapeutic)
- **Family members** who are willing to share their experiences, help others and are aware of the emotional situation of other families

How to proceed?

(For more details, see, in this section: "Designing an accompaniment project," p. 69)

1. PREPARE THE SESSION(S)

Define the objectives

- What subjects may be necessary or useful to discuss?
- It is always better to facilitate the discussion by choosing themes that families are interested in (See Section 3, Action Sheet 311: Themes for group discussions, p. 110).
- What are you hoping to achieve?
- It may be helpful to bring handouts with you (containing information about services, etc.)

Decide how to reach the objective(s)

- Setting up the sessions:
What kinds of group do you want to organize (e.g. always open to participants)?
How many sessions may be needed?
- Do you need the support of a specialist or other external actor?
- What is expected of them?
- How will you evaluate the effectiveness of the sessions?
Prepare (if necessary) evaluation forms for each session

Choose the location and fix the time frame

- If possible, find a meeting-place nearby where the participants will feel at ease.
- Make sure that the participants will not be disturbed during the sessions.
- Consider the accessibility of the meeting-place for the families.
- Try to visit the site you have chosen in order to ensure that it meets these requirements.

* Some groups may meet regularly over an extended period while others may be limited to set topics and to a set number of sessions. It is important to decide what kinds of group you want to organize, but you must also be flexible with regard to the needs of the participants.

2. SELECT THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE FACILITATOR (S)

Number of participants

- Each group should consist of 12-15 persons.

Profile of participants

- Persons who:
 - understand and agree with the objectives of the group session;
 - are highly motivated;
 - are convinced that participating in such groups can help;
 - are ready to hear others' stories and to tell their own.
- A group member who has the trust of the other participants may be asked to help the accompanier, either to facilitate or to organize succeeding sessions.

Types of group

- It is preferable to have groups that are homogeneous (e.g. one in which the participants have the same concerns), in order to encourage the free expression and exchange of common experiences and opinions.
- It is possible to have groups made up of people with differing expectations or views, but the facilitator must always keep these differences in mind during the discussion.
- Some examples of heterogeneous groups:
 - a mix of family members (e.g. siblings and mothers of missing persons);
 - a mixed group made up of persons suffering as a result of the disappearance of their relatives and of those facing other war-related problems.

Profile of the facilitator

- **The facilitator should be someone who:**
 - can earn and retain the respect and the trust of the group;
 - knows how to keep the discussions focused;
 - is able to keep the emotions of the participants, which can be overwhelming, in check.
- **For invited speakers (e.g. professionals or key members of the community):**
 - families should agree to their participation;
 - the reasons for inviting a guest speaker should be explained to the families and to the speaker;
 - preferably, the speaker should have prior knowledge of the families' situation.

3. CONDUCT THE SESSION(S)

Organizing the space

The way the space is organized is important. Experience shows that too many obstacles between the participants (tables, other participants, etc.) can hinder the easy flow of discussion. It is preferable for the members of the group to be seated in a circle or in a semi-circle; this will make it easier for them to see one another and to interact.

The facilitator may either face the entire group or, if he or she wants, sit among them (as shown on the right).



Developing the discussion

- **Introduce**
 - yourself and your role;
 - the objective(s) of the discussion (and why these objectives been chosen);
 - what is expected of the participants;
 - the participants to one another;
 - the rules: respect for one another, confidentiality and equality;
 - how you will proceed; the expected length of the session.

ACTION SHEET 310 Organizing support groups (cont.)

• Explain and ask about

- the topic(s) to be discussed;
↪ See Section 3, Action Sheet 311: Themes for group discussions, p. 110.
- the set-up: duration and frequency of the sessions;
- the expectations of the group;
- the participation of guest speakers.

• Ensure

- that the expectations of the participants match yours;
- that the rules are respected;
- that the atmosphere is friendly and trustful: do not be excessively formal;
- that the discussion does not become acrimonious;
- that the discussion is not disrupted by excessive displays of emotion;
- that the session is not dominated by one or two persons, that all the participants are able to express themselves;
- that, if needed, the participants have time to relax during the session.

• Step in

- only to clarify things; otherwise, let the others talk;
- to keep the discussion focused on the topic (and to prevent it from turning into a conversation between two people or into an outpouring of emotion);
- to make the talk circulate when there is a danger of one or two persons monopolizing the discussion;
- to clarify or summarize ideas and/or key messages;
- to direct the discussion towards a conclusion and, if necessary, towards the declaration of commitments.

• Conclude

- by reminding the group of the most important conclusions they reached (ask the participants to summarize them);
- by thanking all the participants;
- by asking them what they liked or disliked about the session;
- by distributing the evaluation forms (if any);
- by preparing for the next session (choice of theme, who will attend, etc.).

4. SUCCEEDING SESSIONS

All of the points mentioned above apply to the succeeding sessions. In addition, it will be necessary to:

- introduce newcomers (if so planned);
- begin by recapitulating what took place in the previous session. Ask the participants to give their impressions of the previous session;
- ask them if they are comfortable – in the group and in that setting – and whether they would like to suggest improvements. You can use the information in the evaluation forms from the previous session to start the discussion.
- Go round the group and ask everybody to say what has or has not changed since the last session. You can also turn it into an exercise by asking them to begin their responses with phrases like these:

“Since the last meeting I feel ...”

“What I think this group can give me is ...”

“What I learnt when I met the others is that ...”

- Set aside some time for people to say a little bit more about themselves; they may feel more at ease at the second session than during the first one.
- Introduce the topic to be discussed if that has been decided in advance; otherwise, ask the participants if they want to discuss something in particular. With regard to choosing subjects for discussion, support groups are unlike focus groups: in a support group, even if a topic has been chosen beforehand, it is important to allow participants to suggest topics that interest them. Of course, it is necessary for all the members of the group to agree on the choice of subject.

- As at the end of the first session, it is important that the participants summarize what they have learnt, whether about others or about themselves.
- Think of asking the participants whether the discussion was helpful.
- Review the set-up of the meetings and objectives after a few sessions to see whether you are on the right track. Analyse the problems with the families.

INFORMATION

- Discussion groups may be used alternately with other activities (for instance, creative activities).
- Participants should bear in mind that such groups, even those that meet as often as once a week, will eventually disband. Plan to conduct a review after one or two months to see whether it is useful to continue and if so, for how long.
- The facilitator should not expect families to talk freely about difficult issues right away. It is therefore important to help the most introverted persons to feel sufficiently at ease so that they can gradually begin to talk about themselves (and not only about the missing person).
- When facilitators are not mental-health professionals, it is important to consider some sort of supervision for them. It may be useful for facilitators to get the assistance of mental-health professionals regularly; it will reassure them about their handling of the group and help them to understand the effects of the sessions on them; it will also help them to deal with any complications that may arise during the sessions. Organizing debriefing meetings with other facilitators of group sessions might be helpful as well.

What to do when:

- **Someone has not spoken at all**
 - Address the person (without forcing him or her to speak)
 - “Not everyone from the group was able to give us his or her point of view. Would somebody like to say something?”
 - “Would you like to tell us a bit more about yourself or about issues that caught your attention during our discussion?”
- **The discussions lose focus**
 - “Can we try to focus on what we have decided to talk about?”
 - “Let us try to finish what we have started, and talk about...”
 - Restate what was last said about the main subject
- **Someone is not letting others speak**
 - Thank the person for his or her contribution and ask him or her politely to let others express their views
 - Remind him or her that as the objective of the group is sharing, it is necessary to have everyone’s opinion
- **Someone becomes too emotional**
 - Try to propose a break for five or ten minutes
 - Restart the session by asking how the others felt about it
 - After the session, try to talk to the person who seemed emotionally overwhelmed and suggest a referral if necessary
(see Section 3, Action Sheet 321: Referral to a mental-health specialist, p. 121.)
- **The discussion becomes acrimonious**
 - Remind the group that the situation is equally difficult for everybody and that they are here to help one another
 - Propose a break if necessary

ACTION SHEET 311 Themes for group discussions*

OUTSIDERS' VIEWS ON THE MISSING PERSONS/THE FAMILIES' DIFFICULTIES – TIPS

Ask the participants:

- how they feel their situation is regarded in their community;
- whether they talk about the missing persons and what form that takes;
- whether, if they do not talk about the missing persons, they feel that they should;
- what can be done to help them in this regard; what would be beneficial for them;
- what kinds of support they can expect from others (authorities, community, neighbours, friends, etc.);
- what can be done to make outsiders more sensitive to the issue of missing persons;

This theme can also be discussed through an exercise (*see Section 3, Action Sheet 306: Talking with family members, p. 101*).

PARTICIPATING IN COMMEMORATIVE ACTIVITIES – TIPS

- How do the participants feel about commemorative activities organized by the community or authorities?
- Do they find them beneficial? In what way?
- How would they encourage other families to participate in such events or to commemorate the memory of their missing relatives?
- What activities or ceremonies would they like to conduct to honour their missing relatives?

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP ONE ANOTHER? – TIPS

- Help the participants to examine and to state their personal needs (besides the problems related to the disappearance)
- Help them to focus on what they can do for themselves and to not rely on external factors
- Try to emphasize the value of interacting with other families and the helpfulness of speaking to others in the same situation
- What concrete support can they give one another?

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT THE MISSING – TIPS

- What do they think that their children should know about missing family members?
- Do they feel capable of speaking to their children? What would they want to tell them?
- Has anybody discussed this subject with children? What was the outcome? What would they advice others to do?

* These themes are examples; they can also be used in focus groups.

ACTION SHEET 312 Warm-up exercises

It is preferable to begin all group activities with exercises whose purpose is to create a friendly atmosphere.

Examples

1. The facilitator asks the participants to pair up, and the members of each pair to introduce themselves to one another. He or she then leaves the room for five minutes. On returning, the facilitator asks the members of each pair to introduce themselves to the group (one member of the pair introduces the other), until everyone knows who everyone else is.
2. The facilitator goes through the names quickly. He or she gives the group ten minutes to introduce themselves to one another. Then he or she poses a series of funny questions such as:
 - Who has the biggest feet in the group?
 - Who doesn't like fish?
 - Who was good in maths (or some other subject) at school?
 The participants then try to guess the correct answers to these questions.
3. Each participant is given a piece of paper and asked to write down his or her name and three adjectives that describe him or her: for example, "Martin – curious, impatient, and funny." Then the participants introduce themselves to the group in turn, by giving brief explanations for their choices.
4. Place a number of objects on a table (a pen, a picture of an animal, etc.). Then ask the participants to choose, one after the other, the object that best represents them, and to introduce themselves to the group by explaining their choices.

ACTION SHEET 313 Activities for support groups

DEALING WITH WHAT OTHERS SAY

Too often, people in the families' immediate surroundings find it difficult to deal with the families, who are also subjected to many platitudes (for instance, that they should accept the "reality").

Purpose

- To see how families deal with what others say to them
- To have families exchange their experiences in this regard
- To help families improve their interaction with people in their immediate surroundings

Materials needed

- Small coloured cards
- A white board
- Tape (to stick the cards to the board)
- Small coloured dots (red and green)

How to proceed

Group discussion

1. The families are divided into two groups and each group is told to draw up a list of words and "clichés," positive or negative, that they hear about their situation.
2. These words are written on the cards and then stuck to the board.
3. All the participants comment on each word or phrase; they say whether it is helpful or not (mark unhelpful expressions with red dots and helpful ones with green).
4. For the words and phrases marked with red dots, each group has to provide alternatives that might be more helpful.

ACTION SHEET 313 Activities for support groups (cont.)

Role-playing

1. Act out an interaction or a situation that you want to discuss.
2. Have them choose the scenario and the players, and then have them act it out.
3. Discuss how the persons participating in the role-playing exercise felt, and what was helpful and what was not in the encounter simulated by them.
4. Discuss the group's impressions of the exercise and try to define key messages.

The same sort of exercise can be adapted to other themes as well: for instance, a role-playing exercise on telling children about their missing relative.

ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER TO DO THINGS THAT GIVE PLEASURE

Families in support groups can encourage one another to set aside some time for themselves and take a respite from their worries without feeling guilty.

Purpose

- Increasing coping skills by encouraging people to put aside time for themselves and to pay attention to their own needs
- Developing a group dynamic
- Encouraging self-expression and mutual helpfulness

Materials needed

- Small pieces of paper, pens
- Bowl
- White board (for the variation)

How to proceed

1. Give the participants a piece of paper each, on which they will write down what they enjoy doing the most.
2. Put the pieces of paper in a bowl.
3. Each participant will have to pick a piece of paper from the bowl.
4. Participants will take turns to mime the activity listed on their piece of paper, and the others will try to guess what it is.
5. Before retrieving his or her piece of paper, the person whose favourite activity was mimed will have to identify himself or herself.
6. The others then encourage and, if necessary, offer to help this person to do that particular thing as often as possible until the next meeting. The one who picked the piece of paper out of the bowl is assigned the task of asking, at the next meeting, whether the person was able to do what he or she most enjoys.

Variation: Coping with stress

1. Participants write down one or two suggestions for dealing with stress or with a difficult situation.
2. The facilitator reads them aloud and sticks them on the white board.
3. The group discusses these various suggestions and decides which is the most original or the most helpful.
4. Each member of the group chooses a method suggested by someone else and promises to try it until the next meeting.

GRAFFITI WALL

"Provide a large sheet of paper on the wall, plus felt tip pens (tied on with a string). Anyone can write or draw anything at any time. Good for letting off steam and expressing ideas anonymously."(Liebmann, 2004)

The sheet of paper can remain on the wall for the duration of the group's existence. From time to time, facilitators and participants can discuss what is written or drawn on the wall.

ACTION SHEET 314 Recreational activities

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES*

Purpose

Outdoor activities give family members an opportunity to leave their daily difficulties behind for a little while and enjoy themselves. However, it is important that these activities do even more. They should also enable families to share information with others in the same situation and forge ties with them.

Meeting other families in the course of such activities can add to mutual helpfulness because family members will be getting to know each other and sharing experiences and information in a stress-free setting.

Tips for organizing

- The activities may be organized by a committee consisting of family members, thus ensuring their active involvement in the process.
- Preferably, all the participants should agree on where to go and what to do.
- A group discussion about the positive results of the activity can be organized afterwards.
- Creative activities can also be introduced on these occasions; the materials or equipment needed for this should be obtained in advance.

It is not absolutely necessary that the families talk about their missing relatives; however, the subject should not be avoided deliberately. The casualness or informality of the setting may encourage people to reminisce about missing relatives in a positive way and that should not be discouraged.

* Any recreational activity that takes place outdoors.

ACTION SHEET 315 Organizing creative activities

PURPOSE

- To involve individuals in activities that are enjoyable and may help them develop new interests
- To encourage family members to:
 - explore non-verbal ways of expressing ideas and feelings; it is particularly helpful for those who find it difficult to communicate verbally
 - express painful emotions freely and in their own way, which may give them some relief
 - explore a hitherto neglected side of their personalities, perhaps, and release their creative energies; if they participate in these activities regularly, they may be able to deal with their daily difficulties more effectively; the pleasure they feel during these activities may spill over into the rest of their lives
 - communicate and express themselves in a group
 - open themselves to one another and to strengthen feelings of solidarity (especially through shared activities such as acting in plays)
- To develop self-esteem by making something
- To raise public awareness (if the activity involves making a public presentation of some kind: exhibitions, plays, etc.)

WHO SHOULD ORGANIZE OR GUIDE SUCH ACTIVITIES

Artists can help participants to use an artistic medium – drawing, painting, writing, theatre, etc. – for expressing their thoughts and feelings.

Accompaniers can provide the settings (space and materials) for such activities; they can also encourage people to take part in them, for some adults find such activities childish or unbecoming.

Mental-health professionals dealing with bereaved individuals also use art for therapeutic purposes.

TIPS

- People should not be forced to perform or to express their feelings through art unless they are ready
- Such activities may result in an upsurge of emotion. An untrained accompanier should not venture into this area
- **Number of participants per group session: 5-10**

* For more information, see Hill, M.A. *Healing Grief through Art: Art Therapy Bereavement Group Workshops* – <http://www.drawntogether.com>

ACTION SHEET 316 Creative activities: Drawing

Description

- FREE: The participants may draw whatever they want
- COLLECTIVE: The entire group makes one drawing
- THEMED: The group or the facilitator chooses the subject

FREE AND THEMED DRAWINGS

Materials needed

- Paper, colouring materials (water colours, colour pencils, crayons, etc.)
- Sponges

How to proceed

GETTING STARTED

- The facilitator introduces himself and explains the purpose of the activity. Introducing the topic, he or she says something along these lines:
"Today we will try to do something different. Some of you may find it strange or childish to paint and draw, but once you are absorbed by it you will discover how soothing and relaxing it can be. Painting helps us express ourselves in a way that words don't. Sometimes it lets us communicate important messages about ourselves to others. The point is not to make a work of art but to paint or draw something that genuinely expresses what you want. May I ask each of you to make the effort and, also, not to pass judgment on what others do?"

THE ACTIVITY

- Each participant is asked to make a drawing of his or her choice or of something related to the subject that has been chosen. Themed drawings can include a wide variety of subjects. Drawings that are closely related to the participants' situation must be handled with great care.
- An accompanier should not try to interpret the drawings.
- At the end, if the participants feel like it, they may title their drawings and explain, to the others, what they attempted to express.
- Participants are encouraged to say what they think of each other's drawings. They must, however, be reminded that every person's views have been formed by his or her own experiences and that one person's opinion may not always correspond to the meaning intended by another.

CONCLUSION

- The participants are asked to give their impressions: Was the exercise different from what they expected? Was it helpful? In what way?
- The approach described above can be applied to an exercise involving sticking or pasting. Instead of using colouring materials, participants can cut out pictures from newspapers and magazines and assemble them on a piece of paper.
- **It may be useful to set aside time for talking, individually, to participants who had trouble with the exercise.**

VARIATION 1: PAINTING TO MUSIC

Description

- Painting while listening to music. This is a very relaxing and soothing exercise.

Materials needed

- Paper, colouring materials (water colours, colour pencils, crayons, etc.)
- Sponges
- Tables and chairs
- Music

How to proceed

1. Take a moment to listen to the music
2. Then play the music again and ask the group to draw whatever they are inspired to by the music (e.g. abstract paintings depicting the rhythms of the music)
3. At the end, discuss what they felt during the exercise

VARIATION 2: FUNNY SELF-PORTRAITS

The participants make humorous drawings or paintings of themselves and give them titles. The drawings or paintings are then nailed to the wall. This is a good exercise for putting people at ease, and it lightens the atmosphere. It can also be used as a warm-up exercise.

VARIATION 3: LANDSCAPES

The participants draw or paint landscapes (an island, the seashore, etc.) that symbolize something of importance to them. Afterwards, each participant explains his or her choice to the group.

This is a good way to make people say more about themselves.

COLLECTIVE DRAWINGS

Description

- Every participant is given a part in the making of the drawing:
 - They may choose a small portion of the sheet of paper or space on the wall for themselves
 - They may complete a drawing made by another
 - Each step of the process can be divided among the members of the group (drawing, colouring, the depiction of a specific event or subject, etc.)

Materials needed

- A sheet of paper or a wall, depending on the drawing
- Paints, paintbrushes
- Sponges
- Pencils, etc.

How to proceed

GETTING STARTED

- Ask the group about:
 - The subject they have chosen and the execution of the drawing
 - Whether there are certain messages and/or feelings they want to express
 - The location of the finished drawing or painting and to whom it should be shown
 - The effect they expect it to have

THE ACTIVITY

- Give the group a large sheet of paper or choose a location for the mural (wall space can be found in the community and many people can participate in choosing the spot).
- Allot tasks according to the process: e.g. each member of the group may choose one corner to draw or paint or one part of the drawing or painting to work on.
- The participants may work in pairs.
- Observe how members of the group communicate with one another.

CONCLUSION

- Ask participants whether the exercise met their expectations and whether their messages or thoughts came through (especially if the process of drawing or painting was cumulative).
- What are their feelings about the exercise? Was it helpful? In what way?
- What are their impressions of the group dynamic?
- Was the degree of cooperation within the group to their satisfaction?
- How different is this kind of group effort from drawing or painting by oneself?
- Plan the next steps if any (particularly if the finished work is to be exhibited or displayed).

TIPS

- The painting or mural can be displayed or presented on a special occasion (e.g. the International Day of the Missing).
- This activity can be particularly interesting for adolescents: it might be a way for them to understand events in the past. For example, the making of a mural would require them to ask questions and do some research.

ACTION SHEET 316 Creative activities: Drawing (cont.)

VARIATION 1: PROGRESSIVE PAINTING

Participants take turns, each adding his or her part to the painting: for instance, a member of the group will draw some shapes on the sheet of paper before passing it to the person on his or her right, who will add something to it, and so on until the work is completed.

A discussion can be held at the end of the exercise to talk over such things as what the first person had in mind, how the work developed, and the finished product.

VARIATION 2: PATCHWORK

The sheet of paper is divided into squares and each participant draws something symbolizing himself or herself in a square.

Afterwards, the group discusses the results.

VARIATION 3: SCRIBBLE, TEAR AND RECONSTRUCT (LIEBMANN, 2004)

Participants scribble on a large piece of paper, which they tear into pieces. Each participant then takes a few pieces and attempts to make imaginative use of them.

VARIATION 4: PROBLEM-SOLVING IN GROUPS (LIEBMANN, 2004)

One person does a drawing of a difficult situation, which he or she then describes. Other members of the group make improvements to the drawing and discuss them, until the best possible representation of the situation is achieved.

This is a good exercise for emphasizing interaction, cooperation and mutual helpfulness.

ACTION SHEET 317 Creative activities: Writing/Narration

Narrative/Writing activities

1. Reading and discussing stories in groups
2. Writing down personal experiences as stories (or poems)
3. Writing a story together, as a group

Purpose

- To give participants an opportunity to tell their own stories, to share them with others and/or to express their worries and feelings
- To stimulate discussion among participants and the exchanging of emotional experiences
- To provide an opportunity for honouring the memory of the Missing and to restore them to their places in the history of their families or communities
- To raise awareness of the issue of missing persons and of the impact on their families of their disappearance (which would be possible only if these stories or poems were published)

Resources

- Literary sources for stories that may stimulate discussion
- The personal experiences of participants
- A capable narrator (an elderly person, a professional story-teller, etc.) or a writer who can assist the facilitator in helping the participants express themselves and in writing their stories

HOW TO PROCEED

Reading stories

- A person from the group, the facilitator, or an invited guest reads a story, which the participants then discuss
 - The story should have something in common with the situation of the participants and/or contain pertinent ideas that can be discussed: stories of human resilience, for instance, may be very useful
 - Pertinent articles about events in other countries may also be used
- The discussion can develop along these lines:
 - What they thought of the characters
 - What they found particularly inspiring
 - What elements of the story matched their own experiences
 - What they would have done had they been confronted by the situation in which the characters found themselves
 - The lessons to be learnt from the story (try to stress the most important ideas)

Composing the story

- The group will write a story together: after someone provides a beginning, the others will take turns to add to it
- Collective composition of a narrative, oral or written, can give the families an opportunity to focus on their shared experiences; it should help them to feel part of a group and to see that their history is also part of the community's
- **Variation 1: Painting the story:** the same story can also be depicted in a group painting
(see Section 3, Action Sheet 316: *Creative activities: Drawing*, p. 114).
- **Variation 2: Dramatizing the story:** with a playwright's help (or without it), the story can be presented to the public as a play, perhaps on special occasions
- The play does not have to be about the missing person

Poems and stories

The poems or stories written by individuals can be read to the group, discussed by participants and, later, even published in a bulletin, local newspaper, etc.

Stories about the missing person

Short biographies of the missing person and stories about him or her may emphasize the person and not his or her disappearance. They can be published as a leaflet or in a newspaper, or distributed on special occasions and at important ceremonies.

ACTION SHEET 318 Helping families to organize symbolic/traditional/religious celebrations or rituals

DESCRIPTION

Celebrations and rituals are actions that have been codified by cultural beliefs and social attitudes. Their purpose is to give meaning to a situation or an event.

From the families' perspective, celebrations and rituals might serve certain definite purposes with regard to:

- the missing person: by honoring or celebrating his or her memory, appeasing his or her soul, marking his or her departure or absence, expressing regret and pain, restoring his or her place within the family unit, etc.;
- the community: by publicly expressing sadness, showing the value placed on the missing person and reaffirming his or her place within the community, showing respect with regard to collective values and beliefs, encouraging empathy and understanding, etc.

Families can also create small rituals of their own or use those in existence as long as that helps them to cope with their pain. In keeping with tradition and religious tenets, these may be intimate ceremonies or events involving religious leaders or others of significance within the community.

Celebrations or rituals can be organized within a single family; they do not have to include other families in the same situation.

PURPOSE

- To give families an opportunity to meet one of the obligations described above (e.g. honouring and/or remembering their missing relatives)
- To promote interaction among family members (e.g. sharing their memories of the missing person)
- To encourage them to resume their social life
- To enable them to regain a sense of normality, without feeling guilty for wanting to live like other members of their community
- To reinforce their sense of belonging to a group

TIPS

For a celebration that is organized jointly with other families:

- it is important to explain the objectives of this joint celebration to the families
- a joint celebration would have greater value if the families were to organize it themselves
- it is not necessary for religious celebrations to be organized by accompaniers. In fact, when they are organized by persons from the community who are outside the immediate circle of helpers, the families may take it as inducement to approach their own community.

ACTION SHEET 319 Mobilizing a support network

PURPOSE

- To increase or facilitate access to available services
- To help families deal with problems (medical, social, legal, etc.) at hand
- To increase understanding in the community of the problems faced by the families, and thus to create a supportive environment

HOW TO PROCEED

Approach service providers and establish a network

- Identify service providers from the public sector, associations, etc.
- Identify key persons within each service provider and establish contact with them
- Build up knowledge and understanding among these service providers by explaining the issues pertaining to the families, and together with them find ways to make it possible for families to benefit from the services
- Prepare contact sheets (see below) and make information available for families and partners
- Involve key figures from service providers in information sessions, to establish a link between them and the families

Approach the families

Suggested activities for promoting the use of services

- Regular information sessions about various services
- Home visits
- Distributing bulletins or contact sheets containing information
- Distributing handouts describing existing services
- Accompanying (if needed) the families to places where services are provided
- Follow-up in case of problems

A SAMPLE CONTACT SHEET (FOR THE ACCOMPANIER)

Name of the association/
public service/NGO

Contact person(s)

Types of service provided

Available human resources

(Kinds of specialist/
psychosocial workers/
others) and direct contacts

Working procedures
(Charge for services,
working hours, etc.)

Prior experience with the
families of missing persons

Beneficiaries' attitudes to
this kind of service

Action needed to reinforce:

- their understanding
of the families' situation
- families' use of/access
to the service(s)

ACTION SHEET 320 Raising public awareness

PURPOSE

- To draw attention to the problem and widen the spectrum of assistance
- To promote understanding and recognition of the families' difficulties in order to draw support from their immediate surroundings
- To mobilize local authorities and the international community to address the issue of missing persons
- To actively encourage the establishment of national mechanisms for dealing with this issue
- To lessen the families' burden (remembering the missing person and honouring his or her memory)

ACTIVITIES

- Exhibitions/publications (stories, poems, photographs)
- Talk shows (television, radio), interviews
- Posters, informative leaflets
- Newspaper articles
- Documentary films

Exhibitions/Publications

Exhibitions of art produced by the families (e.g. during creative workshops) can be organized. A collection of poems and art produced by the families can be published and distributed, and even sold. Families who attend the exhibition may be willing to tell their stories through the media.

Talk shows

Television and radio: Specialists (e.g. psychologists, lawyers, people helping the families, etc.) and relatives of missing persons can be invited to discuss the issue of disappearance and its consequences. This may give listeners or viewers (including others whose relatives are missing) a chance to call in and speak directly to them.

Documentary films

Documentary films about missing persons (available at the ICRC*) can be shown to the public. If families attend these occasions they will have an opportunity to express their views and describe their experiences to the public. Media coverage of the event might increase its impact.

Newspaper articles

Articles about the lives of missing persons can help fix them in the minds of the public. These articles can also draw attention to the plight of the families since the disappearance of their relatives.

Posters, leaflets

- **Posters bearing key messages** or the names and photographs of missing persons can be used for communicating vital information.
- Although events for raising awareness may be fixed on any day chosen by the organizers, certain occasions present obvious advantages:
 - International Day of the Missing (30 August)
 - Important national anniversaries (Remembrance Day, Armistice Day, etc., or their equivalents)

How to proceed

- **Organize a committee** in which families are included. Their participation is vital, as they are at the heart of the project.
- **Ask the families** (not only the ones on the committee):
 - how the missing persons should be remembered or mentioned. Make sure that confidentiality/ anonymity is respected if requested;
 - what messages they would like to bring to the fore.

If possible, gather suggestions during home visits or when you meet the families.

- **Ensure that the activities are culturally apt** and tackle the families' actual needs.
- **Involve (if possible or useful) local authorities** and key members of the community in the organization of the event or activity.

Remember that the families' stories can be exploited for political purposes

* See the ICRC website for more information: www.icrc.org

ACTION SHEET 321 Referral to a mental-health specialist**ESTABLISH CONTACT**

- Before making a referral, it is important to get in touch with the specialist and explain your role and the situations that you have observed. Remember: not all professionals are aware of the problems faced by this particular group.
- Understand how this person can be of help.
- The person who is making the referral must believe that the specialist can help the families of missing persons.

ASSESS THE SUITABILITY OF THE SETTING

- Make sure that the specialist's workplace is not such as to put off or alienate family members. For instance, psychiatric facilities may not be the most suitable setting in which to meet the families.

BE TACTFUL

- Raise the subject as delicately as possible. You might say something like this to the families: "Sometimes it is hard for people to tell others what they are going through. This happens to all of us, and sometimes it is good for someone from outside to listen to us, to our problems, in order to see things in a different way: experienced people who know how to deal with this kind of suffering. It does not mean that you are mad."*
- An accompanier should be prepared for strong reactions, especially rejection.
- He or she should:
 - make a referral only after having established a certain level of trust with the family member and only if he or she is convinced that the specialist's services are pertinent to the family member's difficulties and likely to be of help;
 - explain clearly how the mental-health professional can be of help;
 - not make rash promises to the family member (for instance, "It will solve all your problems!").

If the family refuses to consult a specialist, show that you are available to discuss the matter later, whenever they would like to. You may also propose other solutions, such as consulting a general practitioner.

* From an internal ICRC document: *Photo-book: Psychosocial aspects*, April 2001

4. ACCOMPANYING FAMILIES DURING THE RECOVERY AND IDENTIFICATION OF HUMAN REMAINS

Introduction

For the families of those who have disappeared, the uncertainty over whether a loved one is dead or alive is agonizing. The recovery and the identification of human remains are essential for answering this question. When a disappearance is the result of armed conflict or political violence, this process also serves as a response to the victims' wishes to establish responsibility for the crime and to see justice, in the broadest sense, done.

Relatives are often the most vocal force driving the clarification of the fate of missing persons. In most cases, they are new to this: they know nothing about the procedural and technical aspects of the process. However, their contributions to and involvement in the process of recovery and identification are important and should be promoted.

The authorities have ultimate responsibility for the management, exhumation and identification of remains. Normally, identification of remains is an integral part of criminal investigation and goes hand-in-hand with ascertaining the cause of death. In a context of armed conflict and political violence, and in particular when the investigation involves the exhumation of mass graves (and when the cause of death may already be known), identification becomes a much more difficult and resource-intensive task. In such cases, other agencies may have to undertake this role and bring forensic specialists to the area. 'Forensic science' is a collective term for a group of disciplines that includes forensic pathology, forensic archaeology, forensic anthropology, forensic radiology, and so on.

Human remains can be identified in three ways:

- I. **Visual** or normal or customary (relatives or acquaintances viewing the remains, possession of identity documents or tags)
- II. **Circumstantial evidence** (matching ante-mortem data with information gathered during examination of the remains)
- III. **Scientific/Objective** (using dental records, fingerprints or DNA)

These three methods do not necessarily follow each other in sequence, but normal practice is that, as visual identification becomes more difficult, the emphasis shifts from "I" to "II" to "III." Whenever possible, visual identification should be supplemented with identification by one of the other two methods.¹³

In this section, we will focus in particular on the last two methods of investigation.

Main phases of the process of recovering and identifying human remains

When a missing person is believed to be dead, resolving the case often involves bringing together two lines of investigation:

- Making it officially known that a person has gone missing, as reported by his or her family, which begins with the filing of a tracing request
- Forensic identification of human remains

Essentially, it amounts to matching persons who are missing with the remains that have been found.

Forensic identification of human remains involves three main stages of investigation:

¹³ *The Missing: Action to Resolve the Problem of People Unaccounted For as a Result of Armed Conflict or Internal Violence and to Assist their Families*, ICRC, October 2002.

INFORMATION

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Background research is needed to locate, assess, collate and organize all available information on missing persons. This information can enhance the identification process in a number of ways: by corroborating witness statements regarding when and where a missing person was last seen, by providing specific details for comparison with characteristics noted on recovered remains, by helping investigators locate possible gravesites; and so on. Background research can turn up information in oral and documentary form, from sources such as witnesses, relatives, authorities and perpetrators; it can also entail the collection and analysis of documents related to the events.

It is important to collect information pertaining to the person before he or she went missing. This information, called ante-mortem data, can be obtained from family members, and sometimes from close friends and colleagues.

RECOVERY OF REMAINS

Proper recovery and management of remains and associated evidence (e.g. clothes and personal items) is vital to the process of forensic identification and can help clarify what happened to the individual concerned.

LABORATORY ANALYSIS AND RECONCILIATION

Laboratory analysis and reconciliation involves answering five main questions:

- Are the remains human or not?
- Are the remains related to the conflict/disaster in question?
- How many individuals are represented within the recovered remains?
- Who are they – what is their IDENTITY?
- What was the cause of death?

In practice, these phases do not always take place in chronological order and sometimes they overlap. For example, background research can start at any time (although the sooner the preliminary investigation begins, the better) and should continue until the missing person is found or until his or her remains are identified and returned to the family.

It is wrong to think of recovery as the most crucial phase, and as something that must be done as soon as possible. In fact, it is neither the beginning nor the end of the investigation. If the other investigative methods are not employed as well, many sets of remains will remain unidentified after their recovery, because not enough will be known about either the background of the site or the victims.

The actual identification usually takes place during laboratory analysis, when information taken from the human remains is compared to that supplied by the families of the missing persons.

Helping families – From beginning to end

The families will undoubtedly face difficult moments during the process of recovery and identification, because they will be forced to confront the possibility of their loved ones being dead. The process can revive painful memories and cause intense emotional distress, for which they may not be prepared.

This is particularly likely to happen when families:

- are asked to provide (physical) information about their relative (the ante-mortem data collection or ante-mortem interview);
- give a blood/saliva sample for DNA analysis;
- are present at the recovery of the remains and/or are asked to look at remains and personal belongings;
- receive the announcement of their loved one's death;
- receive the remains of their loved one.

Not all individuals, and particularly not all family members, will be equally affected by these events. Some people have the resources (supportive families or friends) to endure these difficult occasions or have been made ready to confront the fact of their relative's death; others will require closer accompaniment. Practice shows that in such situations, community support is crucial, as is the presence of persons that families know and trust. Mental-health specialists might be required to help those who find it especially difficult to cope.

 See Section 4, Action Sheet 401: *The accompanier's role*, p. 140.

Accompaniers can play an important supporting role during these difficult moments.

Accompanying families in such cases will mean ensuring that:

- they are prepared for each step of the process in which they take part (an ante-mortem interview, the actual recovery, the identification and/or the handover of the remains, etc.);
- they will receive adequate information and assistance, if available;
- they will not leave the scene of a difficult experience by themselves, and that they will be able to share their experience with a supportive social network (other families of missing persons, other family members, friends, neighbours, members of their community, etc.).

Accompaniers must also determine what their role is in the process of recovery and identification, as well as their limitations. This might mean reflecting on whether they have the ability to cope with these difficult moments, which may remind them of painful experiences of their own (if, for instance, they too have relatives who are missing).

1. Background research

Although generally regarded as the first step in forensic investigation, background research can begin at any time (although the sooner the preliminary investigation begins, the better) and should continue until the missing person is found or until his or her remains are identified and returned to the family.¹⁴

1.1. Preliminary investigations

Preliminary investigation is needed to locate, assess, collate and organize all available information on missing persons. This information can aid the identification process in a number of ways, such as:

- by corroborating witness statements about where and when a missing person was last seen;
- by providing specific details for comparison with characteristics noted on recovered remains;
- by helping investigators locate possible gravesites.

Background research can turn up information, in oral and documentary form, from various sources.

● ORAL SOURCES (INTERVIEWS WITH):

- Family members
- Witnesses
- Friends
- Activists
- Dentists
- Doctors
- Others

● DOCUMENTED SOURCES

- Legal reports
- Police and military reports/archives
- Autopsy reports
- Fingerprints, photographs
- Death certificates
- Cemetery records
- Satellite photos
- Press reports
- NGO reports
- Other sources

¹⁴ Consult the ICRC's Assistance Division for additional guidance in doing background research on missing persons or unidentified remains.

1.2 Ante-mortem data and biological samples

It is important to collect information pertaining to the person before he or she went missing. This information, called ante-mortem data (AMD),¹⁵ can be obtained from family members and sometimes from close friends and colleagues. AMD on a missing person generally include the following types of information:

- General personal/social information (name, age, home address, place of work, marital status, etc.)
- Physical appearance (height, weight, eye colour, hair colour, etc.)
- Medical and dental history (fractures, diseases, missing teeth, dental crowns, fillings, etc.)
- Distinguishing characteristics (habits [e.g. pipe smoking], scars, birthmarks, etc.)
- The clothes and other personal items the missing person was wearing or carrying when he or she was last seen
- Any circumstances related to the disappearance

The “ante-mortem interview” is one of the earliest of the difficult moments that have to be endured by families that are asked to provide information about the physical characteristics of a missing relative; these families will also be asked about the circumstances of the disappearance. This information will be compared with that collected during the post-mortem examination of the remains. The ante-mortem interview is important not only because of the data collected – which can be crucial for the process of identification – but also because it gives the families a chance to tell their story.

In addition to AMD, biological samples (DNA) from the relatives of a missing person (and/or samples from the missing person acquired before his or her disappearance) may be collected for the identification process. DNA analysis must be employed when other techniques prove to be inadequate.

A person’s DNA is inherited directly from his or her parents, and no two people (except monozygotic, or identical, twins) have exactly the same DNA.¹⁶ The fact that every person’s DNA is unique makes DNA analysis a powerful tool for identifying remains.

 See Section 4, Information Sheet 4.1: DNA, p. 135.

 See Section 4, Action Sheet 402: Accompanying families – From beginning to end, p. 142.

 See Section 4, Action Sheet 403: Proper responses to emotional reactions, p. 146.

CASE

For 12 long years, Dzidza lived in hope of finding her two sons and husband alive after they went missing in Srebrenica in 1995. When DNA became a method of matching a living relative’s blood sample to one taken from a recovered bone, some, like Dzidza, either remained sceptical or refused to confront the possibility that their loved ones may not be alive. In 2005, she finally agreed to give a blood sample after a neighbour talked her into it. Two years later, Dzidza received news that one of her sons had been identified, but they couldn’t tell which one because they were too close in age (Almir was born in 1977, Azmir in 1974). Her husband Abdullah was also identified through a single bone, the only bone of his that was recovered from a mass grave. At that moment, everything went black around her, as her darkest fears had been confirmed.

From ICRC website, April 2008

When interviewing family members for information about their missing loved ones, it is important to remember that this might be a very traumatic experience for them. People collecting information from families must show themselves to be supportive and give clear explanations of the way AMD and DNA will be used in forensic identification.

¹⁵ In line with the Agenda for Humanitarian Action adopted at the 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the ICRC’s Assistance Division has formulated a Standard Reporting Format (SRF) for the collection of ante-mortem data, and an ante-mortem/post-mortem database (AM/PM Database) for the proper handling of data on missing persons.

¹⁶ This refers only to nuclear DNA. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) is inherited only from the mother and is usually identical amongst all maternal relatives.

Before contacting the families, the person collecting data and the accompanier should familiarize themselves with the procedure for collecting AMD and DNA, in order to be able to answer the families' questions. They should also make certain that the families have all the information necessary to give their informed consent to participating in the process.

INFORMATION

Persons without specialized skills may collect AMD and DNA, but they need training to ensure that:

- the data are of high quality and reliable (mistakes in data collection may lead to mistakes in the identification process);
- families understand the process and will be emotionally assisted during the collection;
- they will not themselves 'burn out' during the process.

1.3 Other sources of information

The families and friends of missing persons often prove to be the most valuable sources of background information. Family members have usually done a great deal of research on their own to discover as much information as possible about the missing person; this is especially true if several years have passed since he or she disappeared.

Witnesses can also be a vital source of information on missing persons, providing data such as:

- circumstances of disappearance
- information on the burial of unidentified remains
- data regarding the discovery of unidentified remains from:
 - de-mining activities
 - construction or agriculture
 - other accidental discoveries
- third-party/hearsay information on graves.

2. The recovery of remains

Generally, the recovery of remains involves three main phases:

- Locating the remains
- Mapping the remains and the entire site and documenting all relevant information
- Retrieving the remains properly and securing them for transport, which can be particularly difficult if the remains are of many different individuals

Human remains can be found in any setting, indoors (e.g. within buildings, amidst the rubble of destroyed structures) and outdoors (e.g. burial sites, on the ground, in watery surroundings, wells, caves, etc.). There are many methods and tools for finding remains. However, there is, as yet, no device for detecting bones. Often, the best information about the location of remains comes from witness statements.

Proper mapping and documentation make it possible to re-create the site, should it be necessary to return for any reason, and to create a physical or 'hard-copy' map (and/or an electronic copy) for evidentiary, archival and analytical purposes. Mapping and documenting data, and ensuring their proper handling and management, are essential in the recovery process and should be carried out by trained individuals.

Proper recovery and management of remains and associated evidence (e.g. clothes and personal items) are vitally important in forensic identification and can help clarify what happened to the individual concerned.

Ideally, in this process, forensic archaeologists should be active members of the team, especially when remains have to be recovered in complex situations (burial sites, extensive dispersal as can occur in plane crashes, etc.). Their specialized skills and knowledge help ensure that remains are recovered properly and that as much additional information as possible can be gathered from the site. Improper and disrespectful recovery can result in the loss of important data; it can also be extremely traumatic for families.

Proper recovery makes possible, among other things:

- The recovery of all biological and associated physical evidence
 - For assistance in identification
 - Because these are the remains of loved ones
- Less mixing, when the remains of several individuals are found together, at the same site
- Identification of disturbed graves and differentiation between primary and secondary burials¹⁷
- Less post-mortem damage to the remains
- Proper documentation of findings

The recovery of remains is important for both the families and their communities.

 See Action Sheet 402: Accompanying families – From beginning to end, p. 142.

 See Action Sheet 403: Proper responses to emotional reactions, p. 146.

 See Action Sheet 405: Assisting an individual in emotional shock, p. 147.

For the communities

It can play a vital role in healing communities that wish to deal with their past in order to be able to rebuild and to recover from the devastating effects of war. As a result of the recovery, communities are sometimes able to reconstruct facts that had been hidden from them for a long time, which reveal the injustice that they had endured.

EXAMPLE

"Assistance at the individual level can be useless if the person returns to a local community that is in a state of collective grief. For example, in Zimbabwe the family of one exhumed victim strongly expressed the opinion that it was not only they themselves but the whole community that had been offended by their relative's murder, and thus the community also needed to be included in the process and be healed" – M. Blaauw, V. Lähteenmäki, "Denial and silence' or 'acknowledgement and disclosure'," *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 848, December 2002

For the families

- It can help to reconstruct the circumstances of the missing person's death
- It gives them the feeling of being involved in the process and closer to their missing relatives
- It can be – in equal measure – painful and healthy, a necessary stage in uncovering the truth

With some exceptions, being present when remains are recovered is important for families. They can see with their own eyes what they have feared and denied for so many years. It may be one way to come to grips with what they have been through. When the recovery is done professionally, the families see the care with which the remains are handled, and the technical skill involved. This might make it easier for them to reconcile themselves to the situation and to the results of the process.

EXAMPLE

During workshops in Guatemala, accompaniers sometimes invite people who have already been through an exhumation – and who are from other communities – to come and share their experiences with families who are yet to do so. Sharing and exchanging experiences increases the families' confidence in these proceedings.

While exhumations were taking place in villages, information sessions about the process were held in schools and in other locations for the villagers. According to the accompaniers, these sessions helped to increase both the community's grasp of the importance of exhumations and the support given to the families.

ICRC internal report, 2007

¹⁷ A primary burial is the first place where remains were buried. A secondary burial indicates that the remains were exhumed from at least one previous site.

Deciding whether a family member should observe or even take part in the recovery of remains can create a dilemma for persons accompanying the families. Some people might argue that families are best placed to know what they can handle. However, others think that it will be traumatizing for the relatives, even if they have been thoroughly briefed about what they are going to see. In the end, the decision rests with the families. All the accompanier can do is to make sure that families are sufficiently informed and prepared.

CASE

As the first bones begin to appear, the pain returns. Sorrowful faces, tears and suffering are visible. Boris Ayala Pallqui is perhaps the one who most vividly describes the relatives' feelings. "For 25 years, I have had the great pain of not knowing what happened to my father. I feel grief and pent-up frustration because of the years of uncertainty. This is fairly traumatizing, and there are many young people here in the same situation as me. But at the same time, we also have hopes of finding our loved ones' remains, so that we can finally bury them and be able to put flowers on their graves," Boris says, becoming so upset that he breaks down crying.

From ICRC website, Peru 2009

It is important to note that, for various reasons, the presence of families may not always be welcome at recovery sites.¹⁸ In many contexts, families are given the opportunity to see the remains of their loved one only after the process of identification (see below, "Viewing of remains," p. 132). If it is decided, in certain areas, that families' involvement is not possible, or not desirable, it is best to be frank about it and explain the decision to the families.

Families have the right to be fully informed of investigations, either directly or through legal representatives.

3. The identification of the bodies/mortal remains

After the bodies have been recovered, they should be sent for laboratory analysis and reconciliation, to be examined and identified by qualified experts. Information about the missing person's physical characteristics and personal belongings, and about the circumstances of his or her death (AMD) will be compared with the corresponding information from the remains (post-mortem data, or PMD).

In cases where the death was fairly recent, it might be possible for families to recognize their relative on sight, when they are shown either the body itself or photographs of it. However, visual recognition of remains is often not possible and in many circumstances, it is prone to error.

Consequently, it is necessary to use scientific means of identification, which are also aspects of AMD and PMD collection; they are conclusive to a degree that would be considered beyond reasonable doubt in most legal contexts.

These means include:¹⁹

- ➔ Matching ante-mortem and post-mortem dental X-rays
- ➔ Matching ante-mortem and post-mortem fingerprints
- ➔ Matching other identifiers, such as unique physical or medical traits, including skeletal X-rays and numbered surgical implants or prostheses
- ➔ Comparing DNA samples from remains with reference samples

The final step in the laboratory analysis-and-reconciliation stage of forensic identification involves consolidating all the available data (field data, AMD-PMD matching data, etc.) to achieve a positive identification, in which one set of remains is positively matched with one missing person.²⁰ Any information that could help identify a body or set of human remains may be considered by investigators, but, as a general rule, the more reliable (i.e. correct), complete, detailed and specific the data, the better the chances of correctly identifying the remains.

¹⁸ Reasons for excluding families from the recovery process include the possibility of: 1) compromising the investigation by influencing investigators, 2) increasing security risks for families and investigators, 3) further traumatizing the families, 4) rekindling the hostilities. Yet another reason, often the case, is the resistance of authorities and investigators to operating in a fully transparent manner. If it is decided, in certain areas, that families' involvement is not possible or not convenient (e.g. security), this should be clearly explained to the families.

¹⁹ For more information on classification systems used for forensic human identification, see INTERPOL's *Disaster Victim Identification Guide*, <http://www.interpol.int/public/DisasterVictim/default.asp>.

²⁰ In some situations, reconciliation (consolidation of data and final identification) is a separate stage of investigation that is carried out by an external, authorized panel, sometimes known as an "Identification Commission."

After the forensic experts have identified the remains, a pathologist (or other appropriate authority) signs the death certificate. For the families, the identification of the remains is the proof that they were waiting for. As already mentioned, without confirmation of death and without remains to bury, the grieving process cannot begin.

Following the forensic identification

1. The notification of death

After the identity of a missing person has been determined, his or her family should be informed of the fact. The official notification of the death will confirm that their relative has been found.

INFORMATION*

The authorities that issue death certificates have a responsibility to ensure the authenticity of the information contained therein; the certificates should provide information on the cause of death and the availability of the human remains.

The authorities and organizations delivering death certificates should also obtain information on the certificate's significance in the local culture. In order to be credible, the death certificate must be: a. accompanied by evidence; b. based on reliable information; c. issued on an individual basis; d. issued and delivered promptly.

* ICRC, Operational Best Practices Regarding the Management of Human Remains and Information on the Dead by Non-Specialists, ICRC, Geneva.

Ideally, the communication of reliable information on the death of a relative should be the responsibility of civilian or, for the missing in action, military authorities. In many circumstances, other key actors (i.e. the Red Cross / Red Crescent, members of family associations) take on this task.

The announcement of death is a delicate matter that should be handled with great sensitivity. Being transparent and honest is crucial. Persons charged with breaking the news should take into account the family's ability to cope, as well as their own capacity to deal with the situation. It is not always possible to foresee what families need to hear or how much they may be able to handle. For instance, members of family associations who take on the task of breaking the news of a missing person's death to his or her relatives, find it very painful, as it forces them to face their own loss.

"Each time I have to announce that they have found somebody I react as though they have found my own brother," says one member of a family association in the Balkans.

The person announcing the death should also be mindful of the presence of children, who may not be aware of the disappearance of their relative, and who may have been told that he or she would be coming back. It is therefore important to talk to the parents first and encourage or help them to tell their children the truth afterwards.

CASE

MY husband was kidnapped in 2006. He went to refuel his car and called me from the queue, saying he would come home soon. He never came back. We tried everything to get information, calling everyone we knew. We went to the morgue, and we provided a picture. Once they called us to identify a body but it was not him. A lawyer told us that he was detained somewhere, took \$5000 and we never heard from him again. I could not answer my daughter's questions about her father, so I lied. I told her that he had left the country. She fell very ill. It was nine months before I had the courage to tell her he had disappeared and I did not know where he was." – Fatma, 29, Baghdad

From ICRC website, Newsletter, March 2009

Refusal to accept the notification of death

Various reasons may prevent families from accepting the notification of death:

- ➔ The long-awaited truth could be terrifying, because of the nature of the missing relative's death or because the idea itself cannot be grasped.
- ➔ The family may have doubts about the source or the nature of the information, and might not be satisfied with the absence of detail regarding the circumstances of death.
- ➔ Families might distrust the identification process, either because it was done by authorities/experts they distrust or because of a lack of transparency in the process.
- ➔ Some families who feel strongly about recognition for their loved one might not accept the notification unless it is accompanied by some acknowledgement of his or her status (hero, martyr, innocent victim, etc.).
- ➔ Some families might also feel that acceptance would mean that justice will not be done.
- ➔ A family that receives a notification of death but not the remains might find it difficult to accept the fact of death, particularly when rumors to the contrary are circulating. They might feel that to accept the fact of death is to consent, against their wishes, to close their case. As a result, they will reject the official notification in order to obtain more tangible proof of their loved one's death and to seek justice and receive his or her remains.

"It bothers me when people offer me condolences for my husband; I say to them, 'What proof do you have?'" – Wife of a missing man, Armenia

When family members do not accept the news, it would be helpful:

- ➔ to explain the process of identification (if the information is available)
- ➔ to show understanding for their reaction: "*I understand that it is hard for you to rely only on this information*"; "*You can take your time and make your own judgment according to what I have just told you*"
- ➔ to offer to put them in touch with other families: in many instances of refusal, families have changed their minds after meeting other families
- ➔ to state your availability in case they need to discuss the issue further.

2. Viewing of remains

Before being handed over, mortal remains and/or personal belongings that have been identified can be shown to the families for a final confirmation.

Viewing a loved one's remains can be an extremely difficult experience: what the families will see might be very different from the image they have been carrying in their minds. The remains can be incomplete, partially or totally burnt and/or show signs of mutilation or injury.

Confronting the death of their relative, and the circumstances of his or her death as well, can be challenging. Nevertheless, many families feel the need to put themselves through this ordeal, not only for the proof it provides, but also to be able to see their loved one again and feel close to him or her.

Family members should be thoroughly prepared before seeing the remains or personal belongings of their loved ones.

 See Section 4, Action Sheet 402: Accompanying families – From beginning to end, p. 142.

 See Section 4, Action Sheet 403: Proper responses to emotional reactions, p. 146.

 See Section 4, Action Sheet 405: Assisting an individual in emotional shock, p. 147.

EXAMPLE

In the Balkans, during the handover of the missing person's body, some families who were taken to the identification site did not know what to look for; others thought that they would be seeing only the belongings of missing persons.

ICRC internal report, Balkans, 2007

Preparing the families in advance does not guarantee that they will not be overwhelmed by their emotions.

People in various contexts have expressed the following feelings before viewing the remains of their relatives:

INFORMATION

MIXED HOPES

Hoping that a mistake has been made and that the person might still be alive; and at the same time, hoping that the viewing of the remains will put an end to the agonizing uncertainty

GUILT

Guilt for wanting to put an end to uncertainty and for feeling somehow relieved

FEAR OF THEIR OWN REACTIONS

Fear of what they are about to see and fear of their own reactions, especially of losing self-control:

"I hope I will not shame my father by losing my self-control in front of everybody" –
a 23-year-old woman waiting to view the remains of her father.

CASE

The woman bends forward and lowers her voice as she addresses her husband, whom she has not seen for more than 30 years, "You have come back to us. We have been expecting you." There is no response, and no expectation of one. The woman is talking to the skeletal remains of someone who was killed in 1974 during one of the vicious bouts of violence that has wracked Cyprus in the past half-century. She leans forward, kisses the skull and calls her three sons, all aged about 40, to gather round. The normally stoic men are weeping openly. This emotional reunion took place in July 2007 at a laboratory in Nicosia, in the United Nations-controlled buffer zone along the 'green line' dividing the island.

ICRC internal review, 2008

After this experience, families may need some time to absorb what has happened and should be given the chance to express their emotions. They should be encouraged not to stay alone and to share, as far as possible, this difficult but crucial experience with other relatives or friends.

3. The handover

The handover of the remains to the families can take place in various settings, such as:

- a **private family meeting** where a family receives the individually identified remains of their loved one
- a **group gathering** where families will receive the individually identified remains of their loved ones
- a **group gathering** where the community receives the remains that have not been individually identified but that originate from the community.

A collective handover may be the occasion for official speeches and/or public ceremonies. Such commemorative events can have a positive impact on both the families and their communities. They are one way to promote general acknowledgement of events that may have been denied or falsified in the past and to restore the honor of those who have been wronged.²¹

When the handover of remains takes place in any kind of formal setting, the accompanier should guide the families through the process and make sure that they feel as comfortable as possible. The presence of close friends or other relatives might be also an important source of support.

Depending on the circumstances, the families may or may not have had the chance to see the remains before receiving them. In some cases, the remains have been handed over to families without being subjected to any scientific identification.

²¹ Source: ICRC Report: *The Missing and their Families. Summary of the Conclusions arising from Events held prior to the International Conference of Governmental and Non-Governmental Experts (19-21 February 2003)*, Section 8.

CASE

Nina Kortiashvili saw her child for the last time the day he left for the battlefield. She recalls that men later came to her house bearing a coffin they claimed held his remains. They asked for money and told her not to open it, as the boy's face was badly damaged. She did, and it was empty. "I still believe he's alive," she says. "Every time I hear the front gate I'm sure it's him."

ICRC, *Missing Persons: A Hidden Tragedy*

One of the main tasks of the accompanier is to inquire about the information families have been given about the identification process.

Accompaniers should also make sure that the families have sufficient information about the procedural and the legal aspects of the handing over of the remains. Families may be asked to sign documents or receive a death certificate. They should be prepared for such eventualities: be able, for instance, to consult others who have already been through this process.

Accepting death, having to go back to a 'normal' life, means an enormous change in the lives of family members. This will be especially difficult for people whose search for their loved ones gave their life meaning and for whom being 'the mother of a missing person' became a kind of identity. The handover of human remains may signal the beginning of the depressive phase of the grieving process. That moment is particularly painful, as any process of emotional separation would be. Specific attention and support will have to be given to family members at this stage.

CASE

"After Rade was found I felt even lonelier and even more in need of support. While I was looking for him I was still his wife. When that changed, support was nowhere to be found, and the burden was huge. And I had to go on. I wanted to go on" – wife of a missing man, the Balkans

After receiving the remains of their loved ones, families may be able to start to grieve. They may have foreseen this moment a long time ago; even so, it may take them some time to get used to their changed situation. Their manner of coping with the end of hope may be influenced by the way they dealt with their past uncertainty. The return of their loved one's remains might precipitate some people into a state of depression.

INFORMATION SHEET 4.1 DNA

A person's DNA is inherited directly from his parents, and no two people (except monozygotic, or identical, twins) have exactly the same DNA.* The fact that every person's DNA is unique makes DNA a powerful tool for identifying remains.

In forensic identification, DNA data may be used to:

- provide scientific evidence to confirm an AMD-PMD match;
- or
- in DNA-led programmes, provide scientific identification, which is then confirmed with AMD-PMD matching (when the number of missing persons is large, AMD-PMD match confirmation is critical because of the possibility of coincidental DNA matches or human error).

DNA direct reference analysis involves comparing DNA information from the remains of a missing person with that from samples left behind by that person before he died, such as hair (e.g. from a brush or a comb), fluid samples (e.g. as retained by a physician), teeth (e.g. baby teeth), etc.

DNA kinship-reference analysis – the most common type, especially when people are missing as a result of armed conflict or other violent situation, or a natural disaster – involves comparing DNA information from the remains of a missing person with that from samples (e.g. blood, saliva) given by biological relatives of the missing person. Nuclear DNA cannot easily be used for matching with relatives other than close family members. Ideally, children and parents should be used for comparison. Reference samples from non-blood relatives cannot directly provide information on the genetic identity of the missing person.

DNA reference samples can be collected from family members at the same time as AMD.

After the DNA from the missing person's remains and the reference samples are properly processed, DNA experts can compare and evaluate the significance of a match between the DNA from the remains and that from the reference sample(s).**

It might be helpful to prepare, together with experts in charge of the DNA analysis, a document that explains in lay terms what DNA is, how it will be used, whose samples are needed and how many.

* This refers only to nuclear DNA. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) is inherited only from the mother and is usually identical amongst all maternal relatives.

** For more information on the use of DNA for the identification of the remains of the Missing, see *Missing People, DNA Analysis and Identification of Human Remains: A Guide to Best Practice in Armed Conflicts and Other Situations of Armed Violence*, 2nd ed., 2009, ICRC, [http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p4010/\\$File/ICRC_002_4010.PDF](http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p4010/$File/ICRC_002_4010.PDF).

INFORMATION SHEET 4.2 The book of belongings

The 'book of belongings,' used in the Balkans, is a photo album that contains photographs of clothes and other personal belongings that have been recovered with human remains. It must be stressed that recognition of clothing and other personal belongings cannot be considered a method of identification, since it might well be the case that the clothes and personal belongings have changed hands during a conflict or some other incidence of violence. However, recognition of items in the photo album could be of significant assistance in the formal process of identification.

Upon viewing photographs of her husband's crumpled jeans, shirt and underwear in an ICRC "Book of Belongings," she realized with final certainty that her husband would never return (...) Now, despite her grief, this woman has found a sort of respite in finally resolving the fate of her husband. Now she can begin to rebuild her identity in relation to this new reality. (in *Addressing the Needs of Women Affected by Armed Conflict: An ICRC Guidance Document*)

In the former Yugoslavia, mobile teams, each comprising volunteers from the local Red Cross and one member of a family association, assist the families in looking through the book. The members of the mobile teams have been specially trained to provide counselling and support, since it can be very distressing for the families to look through the photos for clues to the fate of their loved ones.

While looking through the book, families might express the same feelings as during the ante-mortem interview and sample collection. The role of the accompanier will be the same throughout, but with this difference: while looking through the book, families might recognize something that belonged to a loved one. They might react as they would to a notification of death.

INFORMATION SHEET 4.3 Ante-mortem and post-mortem matching

After the remains have been properly recovered, they should be sent for laboratory analysis and reconciliation, the first step of which is examination of the remains. This must be carried out by specially trained experts (forensic pathologists, anthropologists, dentists, etc.) who gather information – post-mortem data (PMD) – about the remains themselves and any circumstantial evidence.

PMD may include the following types of information:

- general information about the remains (age range, sex, height, etc.)
- medical and dental facts including unique characteristics of the remains (signs of any old bone fractures or evidence of surgery, condition of the teeth and presence of any dental work such as fillings, etc.)
- fingerprint information
- clothes and personal items found with the remains
- circumstantial information about the remains (where they were found and how they came to be in that location, including witness testimony, etc.).

The PMD must then be matched with the ante-mortem data (AMD) of a missing person (AMD-PMD matching), which must also be carried out by qualified experts. For example:

The family of a missing person reports that he:

- was 21 years old when he disappeared, was 175 cm tall, had a gold crown on an upper, central tooth, broke his left arm when he was twelve;
- was wearing a blue-and-white striped shirt, black trousers with gold buttons and a gold wristwatch when he went missing;
- that he was last seen in December of 1992.

The forensic experts and investigators know that:

- the remains are those of a male individual who was approximately 18-25 years old and 172-178 cm tall when he died, with a gold crown on the upper left central incisor and there is evidence that he broke his left humerus (upper-arm bone) several years before he died;
- a witness reports having seen the body of the missing person buried in February of 1993 in XX village;
- the remains were found with a blue-and-white striped shirt, black trousers with gold-coloured buttons and a yellow metal wristwatch, in a grave in XX village that the local villagers report was dug in February of 1993.

AMD	PMD
male	male
21 years old	18-25 years old
175 cm	172-178 cm
gold crown on upper, central tooth	gold crown on upper, left central incisor
broke left arm at age of 12	old, healed fracture of left humerus
was wearing blue-and-white striped shirt, black trousers with gold buttons and a gold wristwatch when he went missing	found with blue-and-white striped shirt, black trousers with gold-coloured buttons and a yellow metal wristwatch
last seen in December of 1992	witness reports having seen the body of the missing person buried in February of 1993 in XX village/remains found in a grave in XX village that the local villagers report was made in February of 1993

AMD-PMD Match

The greater the number of matching characteristics there are between the AMD and PMD, the greater the likelihood that the remains are indeed what they are believed to be. For example, if the only characteristics that match the AMD with the PMD relate to general information about the remains, such as those listed above in black, then it is highly probable that many missing persons will “match” the unidentified set of remains. But, logically, there can be only one true match. These coincidental matches can be particularly common and problematic if many of the missing persons are soldiers missing in action. However, if additional matching characteristics are present, such as those listed above in blue, then the likelihood that an AMD-PMD match is correct increases greatly.* AMD-PMD matching can be supplemented by various means, such as facial reconstruction and comparing photographs with the remains.

* Databases of missing persons, such as the ICRC’s AM/PM Database, can be of assistance in automated preliminary matching, especially if there are large numbers of missing persons.

INFORMATION SHEET 4.4 Feelings and reactions related to the interview and to sample collection

The ante-mortem interview and the sample collection can be a grim experience for relatives, as they are forced to confront the possibility that the person being searched for is no longer alive.

The moment of confrontation could trigger the following responses:

Critical aspects	Positive outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refusal to participate • Inability to remember details • Emotional and physical reactions • Anger • High expectations • Fear of making a mistake • Embarrassment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling acknowledged • Finding the courage to face the past • Being prepared • Being able to contribute (to finding their loved ones)

CRITICAL ASPECTS

A refusal may follow from a number of factors:

- either the families are not ready to confront their loss – in which case they should not be forced to go through the process – or they do not believe that anything will come of the process
- distrust of these techniques, which may be linked to lack of information and/or a deep fear of being confronted by the truth that they might reveal
- families might also feel that these procedures provide a means for authorities to impose a silent acceptance of past events, thus denying them the opportunity to express their reactions and ask for justice. Refusal, therefore, can also be a way to protest or express one's anger. It is important to note that anger and protest are normal reactions to loss
- families may also refuse to participate because there is disagreement within the family about whether to cooperate or not
- fear of putting the missing person or other relatives at risk by participating.

The inability to remember details could be a consequence of the anxiety released by painful memories. It might also be the result of a lot of time having passed since the disappearance or related to specific questions that the relatives never paid attention to (like clothing brands or whether the wisdom teeth had erupted or not).

Remembering the missing person may revive a state of psychological suffering linked to personal experiences (e.g. specific event during the war, the disappearance itself). This can set off emotional (e.g. crying) and physical (e.g. shaking) reactions.

Anger: When anger is expressed, sometimes it is simply because families have not yet had the opportunity to do so. It is often related to lack of support and recognition and to the frustration created by lack of answers. It could be said that in a certain way, the person collecting the ante-mortem data gives families the space and the opportunity to express their anger and frustration.

High expectations are caused by the fact that somebody is finally trying to take concrete action: this can give a family an abrupt lift. They might see in this the possibility of an end to their long period of uncertainty. It is of the utmost importance to be transparent and realistic about the possible outcomes of the identification process and not to create false or unrealizable expectations.

Fear of making a mistake: People might be afraid of giving the wrong answer, in the belief that it might lead to misidentification or signal insufficient knowledge of their loved one. Families also feel guilty for not knowing the answers to certain questions. They assume that others know the answers because otherwise the question would not be asked at all. Whenever this happens reassure the family that it is normal not to remember all these details and try to obtain the information in some other way.

Embarrassment: Certain questions that have to be asked during an ante-mortem interview are quite intimate and might make both the collector and the family uncomfortable: for example, asking the parents whether their young daughter was pregnant, or questions about underwear or certain diseases that are regarded as taboo subjects.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Feeling acknowledged: To most families it is a source of comfort that someone has acknowledged their suffering and is ready to show them attention or provide answers.

Giving out information about their missing relative can also provide families with an opportunity to express personal thoughts and emotions, which they might not have done previously. By telling their personal story and by giving a sample, relatives also feel that they are contributing to the identification of their loved ones in a very concrete way.

Finding the courage to face the past: If they are conducted with sufficient delicacy, these procedures can also give families the courage to face their past as well as each other.

"I was not aware what had happened to my father (...) When they came to collect blood my mother finally told us the story of his disappearance" - a young woman, 24 years old

Being prepared: Some people might have difficulty in contemplating the possibility that their loved one might be no more. It is important nonetheless to bear in mind that the procedures, when carried out with understanding and sympathy, can also help families to gradually prepare themselves for painful news of the fate of their missing relative.

ACTION SHEET 401 The accompanier's role

GET INFO AND INFORM

An accompanier should be familiar with the following:

1. The socio-cultural context in which the recovery and identification of the remains is taking place, in order to promote respect for the families' beliefs.
2. The families' situation. Knowing their difficulties and their needs, but also their strengths, will help to provide them with the most suitable response (*see Section 3 as well*).
3. The way mortal remains will be recovered and identified (phases and procedures), the services available, and the experts in charge, in order to:
 - inform families at each step of the process
 - sensitize local actors and the experts in charge to the situation of the families.

Such information may not be accessible to a non-specialist. The accompanier should provide the information to which he or she has access and ask for the support of other specialists or actors (e.g. representatives from the authorities, community leaders, legal NGOs, INGOs).

WARN

- It is important for families and communities to know that the recovery and the identification may not match their hopes and expectations.
- They must also be informed of the roles and the limitations of those who are involved in the process (collectors, forensic experts, etc.).
- Relatives and witnesses should be told about the legal or security risks of providing information about recovery sites and of being present at a recovery.

PREPARE

Their desire to see their loved one again and to have physical proof of his or her death is so great that sometimes families might fail to consider their ability to cope. While it is up to family members to decide whether or not they will be present on such occasions, it is important to ensure that they are prepared for what they are about to see (this can be done, for instance, through information sessions involving families who have experienced such situations and/or forensic experts).

GUIDE

Families may feel some confusion when having to deal with such an unfamiliar and painful situation. Accompaniers can give them practical advice and information that will help them to endure it without feeling all at sea.

PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

- Let families know that you will be available throughout the process.
- Show understanding of what they are going through. Provide immediate comfort when necessary (something to drink, a chair, etc.). Listen to their story; take time to discuss the missing person. Reassure them that their reactions and feelings are normal, not at all unusual.
- Pay close attention to their way of coping with the situation – so that you can suggest a break when one is needed.
- Give them positive feedback – when relevant – about what they did and what they want to do (including activities that are not related to the disappearance of their loved one).
- When necessary, provide immediate assistance to people in shock (reassurance, referral to health specialists) (see Action Sheet 405: Assisting an individual in emotional shock, p. 147).
- Group sessions involving a number of families will give them the time and the room to discuss their feelings and to share information. This can create the dynamics of mutual support.
- Before or after a difficult event, group activities and/or information sessions can be used as a means to introduce families to each other and to build links between them.

ENCOURAGE MUTUAL SUPPORT AND THE DEVELOPMENT

OF A SUPPORTIVE NETWORK

- Persons in the families' immediate social environment may be informed about the process of recovering and identifying mortal remains. It can promote mutual understanding and support, and prevent the growth of false rumors or expectations. In addition, the results of the process may not only serve the well-being of the families, but may also contribute to illuminating some aspect of the community's history.
- The presence of other family members and/or close friends can be a great help or source of support during difficult moments, as it may strengthen family members and give them the courage to go through the process.
- The involvement of external actors (mental-health experts, community representatives, religious leaders, National Society staff/volunteers, etc.) throughout the process can contribute to the accompaniment of the families: they could provide additional support when necessary.

ACTION SHEET 402 Accompanying families – From beginning to end

	AMD and sample collection	Recovery of remains
Ensure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families understand the purpose of the collection and the process of which it is a part, and that their consent has been given with that in mind • Social customs and cultural beliefs are respected • Persons in charge of the collection are informed of the situation of the families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social customs and cultural beliefs are respected <p><i>In many cases, families are not present at the exhumation of mortal remains</i></p>
Prepare for the interview and other occasions by informing families about: <i>The information can be conveyed in a group setting or individually. Group sessions are recommended, as they reinforce social links and bolster mutual support.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of the collection → get an informed consent; do not create false expectations • The type of information collected • The document needed • The way AMD and biological samples will be used and by whom (forensic experts, prosecutors, etc.) • The persons who will have access to it <p><i>Forensic experts may be asked to participate in information sessions when these are organized</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The type of information gathered by the forensic experts during and after the exhumation • The way the remains will be identified • The duration of the process and the next steps • The persons who will have access to the bodies and to the information gathered • The place where the remains will be stored • Persons to contact for more information <p><i>You may not have access to all the information. Provide what is available.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the families will be assisting at the exhumation, let them know that: • All the remains may not be found • Recovery does not necessarily lead to identification • The remains will look very different from their memories of their relative • It would be best if they were accompanied by someone they trust
During the interview or during other occasions, let families know that:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The AMD questionnaire is long and questions may be repetitive • Some of the questions may be difficult • They can take a break during the interview whenever they want • They can ask questions if they need to have certain points clarified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They can ask questions if they need more clarification

	Notification of death	Viewing of mortal remains	Handover of remains
Ensure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The notification is done in person and in a secure environment The announcement is done with the respect due social customs and religious practices Families have been given enough information about the way their relatives have been identified and the circumstances of their death (taking into account the emotional vulnerability of the person receiving the news) Persons in charge of breaking the news understand the situation of the families and will take into account their vulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mortal remains are respected and disposed of in accordance with cultural necessities Families have been given enough information about the way their relatives have been identified and about what has been found (bones, personal belongings, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mortal remains are respected and disposed of in accordance with cultural necessities Families have been given enough information about what will be handed over to them (parts of the body, personal belongings, etc.) They have also been given enough information about the place where their relatives were found, how they have been identified and the circumstances of their death (taking into account the emotional vulnerability of family members)
Prepare for the interview and other occasions by informing families about: <i>The information can be conveyed in a group setting or individually. Group sessions are recommended, as they reinforce social links and bolster mutual support.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The helpfulness of not being alone <p><i>Ideally, you should identify the persons who should be given the news first, and whenever possible, you should ensure his or her presence during the notification</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The procedure The state of the remains if they have not already been told The way the remains and/or personal belongings will be disposed of – The persons who will be present The document needed <p><i>In case of a collective viewing, it is recommended that an information session, for all the families concerned, be organized. It may also be helpful to ask families who have already been through this to attend the information session.</i></p> <p><i>In some situations, and if possible, you may consider suggesting to the families that they first see photos of the remains and of the place where their loved one was found.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The procedure, the setting and the place. Families may be asked to sign documents and/or be given a death certificate The way the remains and/or personal belongings will be handed over to them; and about the state of the remains if they do not have this information The persons who will be present The document needed (e.g. ID card)
During the interview or during other occasions, let families know that:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They can ask questions if they need more clarification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They can take their time to identify the remains and/or personal belongings They can ask questions if they need to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They can ask questions if needed

ACTION SHEET 402 Accompanying families – From beginning to end (cont.)

	AMD and sample collection	Recovery of remains
Provide direct support by:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking quietly and remaining calm • Reassuring families when they express anxiety, nervousness or anger • Sparing time (if families have questions) • Taking time to speak with them about their experience, to share memories of their missing relatives or to discuss their daily lives • Giving them positive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answering their questions if the information is available • Listening to their story; taking time to speak with them about their missing relatives and for informal conversation • Remaining calm and providing reassurance when families express anxiety, nervousness or anger • Giving them positive feedback • Letting them know that you are available
After the interview or after other occasions, meet with families in order to: <i>Meetings can be conducted in a group setting or individually. Group sessions are recommended, as they reinforce social links and bolster mutual support.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss their feeling and emotions; encourage them to talk about it to someone they trust • Discuss the next steps • Identify individuals in need of more information or specialized assistance • Encourage mutual support within the family as well as between all the families of missing persons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss their feeling and emotions ; encourage them to talk about it to someone they trust • Explain what will happen next; the waiting period can be very long and the results may not match their expectations • Identify individuals in need of more information or specialized assistance • Encourage mutual support within the family as well as between all the families of missing persons

	Notification of death	Viewing of mortal remains	Handover of remains
Provide direct support by:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answering their questions if the information is available • Listening to their story; taking time to speak with them about their missing relatives and for informal conversation • Remaining calm and providing reassurance when families express anxiety, nervousness or anger • Giving them positive feedback • Letting them know that you are available <p><i>The presence of a religious figure can be reassuring</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answering their questions if the information is available • Listening to their story; taking time to speak with them about their missing relatives and for informal conversation • Remaining calm and providing reassurance when families express anxiety, nervousness or anger • Giving them positive feedback • Letting them know that you are available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being reassuring, showing compassion • Guiding them through the process • Letting them know that you are available <p><i>The presence of close friends or relatives may be an important source of support</i></p>
After the interview or after other occasions, meet with families in order to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify individuals in need of more information or specialized assistance • Inform them about the next step: viewing and/or handover of the remains • Discuss funeral arrangements if appropriate • Provide information regarding administrative and legal matters • Discuss their feeling; share memories of their relatives; encourage them to resume their daily lives <p><i>Legal experts and representative from the authorities may be asked to participate in information sessions – if organized – in order to answer the families' questions</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify individuals in need of more information or specialized assistance • Discuss their feeling and emotions; encourage them to talk with someone they trust • Provide information concerning the handover of the remains (if available) • Discuss funeral arrangements if appropriate • Provide information regarding administrative and legal matters <p><i>Religious figures and/or community leaders may be invited to attend group sessions</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share emotions and feelings • Honour and celebrate the memory of their relatives • Provide information regarding administrative and legal matters • Identify individuals in need of specialized assistance. For some people, the handover of the remains may signal the onset of depression <p><i>Collective commemorations involving the whole community could be organized in order to give families an opportunity to share their pain with those in their social setting and to pay tribute publicly to their relatives.</i></p>

ACTION SHEET 403 Proper responses to emotional reactions

Reactions	Dos	Don'ts
Crying or trembling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stop the interview and allow some time to pass Ask if they are willing to continue <i>"You are not obliged to answer if it is too difficult for you"</i> <i>"Take your time"</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Say: <i>"Now you have to stop crying"</i> <i>"Can we continue now?"</i> <i>"Be strong"</i> <i>"Time will help you get over it"</i> <i>"I know exactly how you feel"</i>
Aggressive behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remain calm and try to explain the purpose of the project, and reassure them that it is understandable that they feel as they do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take it personally Respond in the same manner: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"I am only trying to do my job"</i> <i>"You have to calm down now"</i>
Refusal to go through the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain that it is their right to do so, but in case they change their minds, the door is open Explain this again, and very patiently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Force them or try to change their minds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"It is better for you, etc."</i>
Fear on recognizing a photo or while giving blood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inform the families what will happen next in case they do recognize the picture/items Make sure that they are not confused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Console them by saying: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"Maybe it is not him"</i> <i>"This way you will be able to bury him"</i>
Relieved that they do not recognize what they see in the photos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain objectively what this means 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer comfort by saying that it is good for them or that you are sorry for them

ACTION SHEET 404 Breaking the news

THINGS TO CONSIDER FOR THE PERSON IN CHARGE OF BREAKING THE NEWS:

- Break the news gradually. Begin by saying, for instance, *"I have sad news to give you."* Let a few moments pass before continuing, in order to give the person time to prepare. *"The relative you were looking for (name and family relationship) has been found dead."* Pause again, and then: ***"I am very sorry. Please accept my condolences."***
- State the name of the deceased in accordance with cultural norms (first name, family name or both): bereaved persons are very sensitive about the respect their loved one is shown during these moments.
- Respect local customs.
- Do not forget to mention the source of the information.
- Allow the families time to react: speak calmly and slowly.
- Suggest that they sit down and have a glass of water.
- Show warmth and compassion.
- Use words that give comfort and provide reassurance when family members are emotionally overwhelmed.
- Avoid metaphors or ambiguous words to ensure that the family understands that the person in question really is dead.
- Do not try to change the subject when the person is crying or wants to talk about the deceased.
- Take time to answer questions and discuss the family's intentions or their immediate plans.
- Make sure, if the person is unresponsive, that he or she has understood the news.
- Do not show signs of powerlessness because there is no magic word that will ease the family's pain.

ACTION SHEET 405 Assisting an individual in emotional shock

The immediate psychological reaction to an event varies from one person to another. This reaction depends on several factors, such as: the nature of the situation, the level of awareness of individuals, their personal qualities. Some people may be totally overwhelmed by their emotional response and fall into a state of shock. A reaction of this sort is not pathological and cannot be compared to specific post-traumatic disorders that have to be addressed by a medical or mental-health specialist.

Expressions of emotional shock also vary from one person to another; they do not always necessitate anything more than the provision of immediate support.*

Signs of emotional shock include the following:

- looking glassy-eyed
- unresponsiveness to questions or information
- disorientation
- extreme emotional reactions (e.g. uncontrollable crying, panic attack)
- uncontrollable physical reactions (e.g. trembling, shaking, hyperventilation)
- agitation or frantic behaviour; uncontrollable aggressiveness/dangerous acting out.

The accompanier should first consider taking the following actions:

- Remain calm, control his or her own emotions, speak softly, encourage eye contact.
- If the person in question is accompanied by relatives or close friends, ask for their support.
- Take the person aside and speak quietly to him or her; suggest that a relative or friend be present, if necessary.
- Offer a glass of water or a chair.
- Help the person to calm down.
- Address his or her immediate concerns (e.g. answer questions or respond to worries) and provide concrete information.
- If the person is extremely agitated, speaking too rapidly or seems to be losing touch with his or her surroundings, ask him or her to breathe slowly and deeply.
- Suggest that he or she remain focused on the immediate situation; ask concrete questions that can help him or her collect himself or herself (for example, ask for a description of the surroundings and what he or she is seeing and hearing; try to clarify what happened and the order of events); suggest staying with him or her if that seems necessary.

Further help (medical assistance) will be required if the person does not show any improvement.

* See also, *Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide* (2005), National Centre for PTSD and National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

5. DEALING WITH WORK-RELATED STRESS

What is stress?

Stress is a normal reaction and most of the time a useful one. It enables people to react and to adapt themselves to changes in their environment. In some situations, excessive stress for a prolonged period may lead to exhaustion (burnout) and have an adverse impact on one's work and personal life. One should be able to recognize the first signs of excessive stress and take suitable action.

The nature and intensity of stress is determined by:

- events and changes in the world outside;
- individual perceptions: different people may perceive the same stressor differently. A situation that is intolerable or stressful for one person may be stimulating for another;
- each person's response to it.

Causes of stress

There are various causes for the stress felt by accompaniers, such as:

- listening to painful stories, especially when the accompanier has had similar experiences. he or she may identify excessively with the stories or experiences of others
- dealing with disturbing images and situations (the issue of human remains, for instance)
- frustration and feelings of powerlessness and uselessness owing to:
 - the families' high expectations and being pressured to do more than one is capable of doing
 - the high expectations that accompaniers have of themselves
 - problems with external mechanisms (absence of law on the Missing, lack of progress in cases) that can undermine the value of small yet important actions
- excessive involvement in the problems of families; not knowing how to keep the right distance
- taking on all the responsibility for helping the families
- relationship with colleagues, lack of external support
- family and personal problems.

Recognizing signs of stress

Stress varies from person to person. The same event can be stressful for some and not at all for others. This is equally true for stress reactions. In order not to become exhausted, or 'burnt out,' one must be able to recognize signs that one is under excessive stress, by paying particular attention to changes that occur in:

- **Emotions/ Feelings**
Beginning to feel overly anxious, sad, easily irritable, and even aggressive
- **Thoughts**
More preoccupied than usual, difficulty concentrating
- **Body**
Headaches, fatigue, backaches
- **Behaviour**
Drinking and/or smoking more than usual, working too hard, difficulty sleeping

All these reactions are normal and should decrease slowly over time and after taking action. If the stress does not subside, asking for help is a sign neither of weakness nor of incompetence.

Dealing with stress

Dealing with stress is also a very individual matter. Everybody has the resources, but people often forget to use them when they feel stressed.

The following actions can help to reduce stress:

- identifying the causes (personal situation, reactions of families)
- maintaining good physical and mental health: this can be achieved by giving space and time for recreational activities, resting sufficiently and maintaining a healthy diet
- self-expression (verbally or through art, sports and other activities)
- planning and prioritization
- relaxation techniques
- asking for help from others (on personal and professional issues) through peer support, group activities or supervision.

It is important to set aside time to think about stressful situations, to reflect on how one reacts to them and to consider what preventive measures to take.

 See *Section 5, Action Sheet 501: Exercises for increasing self-awareness and reducing stress, p. 152*
and *Action Sheet 502: Intervision, p. 154.*

ACTION SHEET 501 Exercises for increasing self-awareness and reducing stress

EXERCISE NO. 1. KNOW YOUR OWN RESOURCES

Set aside some time when you are calm and use the memory of this moment of serenity at a future time when you are upset, overwhelmed or distressed. Write a rainy day letter* from you to you.

1. List the activities that you find comforting.
2. Remind yourself of your strengths.
3. Remind yourself of your special talents, abilities and interests.
4. Remind yourself of your hopes and dreams for the future.
5. Give yourself special advice that is important to you.
6. You can also write down the names and phone numbers of supportive friends or family members.

EXERCISE NO. 2

Imagine that a wise and compassionate good friend has been with you since you were born. This friend's purpose has been to recognize and observe all your positive personality traits and positive features.**

For the next fifteen minutes, imagine that this friend is dictating a list of your positive attributes.

- Write down whatever comes to your mind; make a list of what you think this friend would say.
- Which personality features do you value the most, and want to continue to influence your approach to life?

EXERCISE NO. 3. BODY RELAXATION***

The first step is the systematic relaxation of your physical body, focusing on the muscles. Many different sequences are useful. Try the following:

Get into a comfortable position, lying on your back or sitting in a chair where you can lean back with your head supported. Uncross your legs. Place your arms by your sides.

Focus on the tips of the toes of your left foot. Let a wave of relaxation start there and move up over your left foot, ankle, lower leg, knee and thigh into the left hip. Relax all aspects of the leg, especially the muscles. Repeat the process, beginning at the tips of the toes of the right foot and going up into the right hip. Next, let a wave of relaxation start in the tips of the fingers and thumb of the left hand. Allow the feeling of relaxation to move over the hand, wrist, forearm, elbow and upper arm, continuing into the left shoulder. Repeat the process on the right side.

Now, a wave of relaxation starts at the top of the back of the left leg and moves up over the left buttock, the lower left back, mid-back, upper back and up over the left shoulder. Repeat the process on the right side. Then, another wave of relaxation begins between the buttocks and moves up over the middle of the back up to the back of the neck.

Let a wave of relaxation move from the outer part of your left leg up the left side of your body and into the left shoulder. Do the same on the right.

Now, a wave of relaxation begins on the front and inside of the left leg and moves up over the left side of the front of the body up over the left shoulder. Do the same on the right. Then start a wave of relaxation in the back of the genital region and let it move up over the middle of the front of the body, the centre of the abdomen and chest, and up to the front of the neck.

Now, the wave of relaxation moves around the neck to the left and down the left shoulder and continues around to the back of the neck. From there it continues circling the neck to the right side and down the right shoulder. Finally, it continues around back to the front where it starts to move up over the face.

The wave of relaxation moves up over the chin, lips, nose, the left eye and the right eye, the left side of the face and the area around the left ear, the right side of the face and the area around the right ear. Then it moves up over the left forehead, over the left side of the top of the head and down the left side of the back of the head and the left side of the back of the neck down to the left shoulder. Another wave of relaxation moves from the right side of the forehead up, over and down to the right shoulder. Finally, a wave of relaxation moves from the centre of the forehead up over the top of the head and down the back of the head and neck.

Return to any areas of tension that remain and relax them.

While you are going through the process of relaxation, certain thoughts may come into your mind. Don't resist them! That will prevent relaxation. Never try to exclude thoughts; that just makes it more likely that they will crop up. Deciding "I'm not going to think about work" virtually guarantees thinking about work. It's better to accept the fact: "Thoughts about work may come up. That's O.K." As soon as you allow a thought to be there, whether or not you like it, it can disappear. After any distraction, just go back to the relaxation exercise.

* Dolan, Y. (2004), *Beyond Survival: Living Well is the Best Revenge*, BT Press.

** Ibid.

*** From ICRC, Stress Prevention Module for Detailed Data Collection (DDC) on Missing Persons, Internal document, 2007.

ACTION SHEET 502 Intervision

Another important way to deal with work-related stress is to get together with your colleagues from time to time and discuss difficulties that all of you have encountered and find solutions together: This technique is also known as **intervision**.

KEY ELEMENTS OF INTERVISION*

Intervision is a method of learning that allows a group to supervise itself, without the help of a professional supervisor.

The intervension group is one in which people can:

- **Exchange experiences and thoughts** with other people from the same background (most of the time with other professionals)
- **Ask for support related to a case**, or a difficult situation and analyse it with the group
- **Express reactions and emotions** related to work
- **Express their unhappiness with certain institutional arrangements** and search together for solutions in a **mutually supportive and respectful atmosphere**

Two rules of conduct have to be respected to ensure mutual trust:

- **Confidentiality** – Everything that is said in the group remains in the group
- **To prevent any judgment**, it is necessary that all the members agree to talk ONLY about the situation or issue in question and NOT about the person who brings it up. The goal is to help the person to find solutions and NOT to evaluate his or her work.

THE GUARANTOR

One member of the group will play the role of guarantor: this person is responsible for making sure that the session functions smoothly. The guarantor has no power over the others, but he or she does have their trust.

The guarantor must not direct the discussion. He or she should:

- Express no personal opinions, suggestions or judgments
- Welcome new opinions, because new ideas are needed to solve the issues being raised
- Avoid intervening while the group is working well, but manage the group dynamic and head off any conflicts that might develop
- Ensure that all members participate equally
- Focus the debate if too many digressions develop
- Keep time: remind the members of the time and regulate the session accordingly
- Provide a summary of the session

From Laumont, B. Tadjet, A (2000), "L'Intervision ou la fin de la solitude du travailleur psychosocial," Brussels: MSF – Belgium, Internal document.

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