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Handbook For Working with Lebanese Families of Missing Persons



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Contents

List of Acronyms	5
Executive Summary	6
Preface	7
General Introduction	7
Purpose and Scope	8
Why a Trauma-informed Approach?	9
What is a Trauma-informed Approach?	10
Learning Objectives.....	10
Chapter 1: Brief History of the Lebanese War, the Plight of the Missing and the Complexity in Terms of the Truth-seeking Process.....	11
A Brief Historical Overview of the Lebanese War	11
The Case of Missing Persons from The Lebanese War	12
Major Events Leading to Disappearances	12
<i>Sabet El Aswad – Black Saturday (1975).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Khamis el Aswad – Black Thursday (1975)</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Karantina Massacre (1976).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Damour Massacre (1976).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Tal El Zaatar and Jisr El Basha (1976).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Sabra and Shatila (1982)</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Hareb El Jabal – War of the Mountains (1983).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Christian Civilians Executed in Jiyeh, Alman, and Other Villages (1985).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>War of the Camps (1985).....</i>	<i>14</i>
Efforts to Uncover the Truth and Steps Taken by Authorities	15
<i>Previous Attempts by Authorities</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Law 105 and Its Impact</i>	<i>15</i>

Chapter 2: Scope of Needs of Families of Missing Persons.....	16
ICRC Family Needs Assessment Findings and Recommendations - 2013	16
Act for the Disappeared Family Needs Assessment Findings and Recommendations-2021	25
Chapter 3: Ambiguous Loss: A Psychosocial Timeline of the Experience of Having a Loved One Disappear and Shared Experiences by Family Members	35
Looking Deeper into Ambiguous Loss.....	36
“Leaving Without a Goodbye”- A Story of Disappearance	37
Phases of Ambiguous Loss.....	40
<i>Active Search</i>	40
<i>Avoidance of Feelings of Hopelessness and Helplessness</i>	41
<i>Pivoting from Hope to Hopelessness</i>	41
<i>Alertness and Maintaining Routines and Rituals</i>	41
<i>Alternation between Hope and Despair</i>	42
<i>Desire to Return to Normal Life</i>	42
<i>Pressures from Authorities and Family Members</i>	42
<i>Adjustment of the Ambiguity</i>	43
Impact of the Disappearance on the Individual, Familial and Societal Levels.....	43
<i>On the Individual Level</i>	44
<i>On the Family Level</i>	45
<i>On the Social Level</i>	48
Chapter 4: Mental Health and Psychosocial Guidelines and Considerations.....	50
Past Stakeholder Initiatives with the Families.....	52
<i>Psychosocial Support Sessions and Memorialization Activities</i>	52
<i>Memorialization</i>	54
A Trauma-informed Approach.....	55
<i>How does this definition apply to families of missing persons?</i>	56
<i>The 4C Model</i>	57
<i>How a Trauma-informed Approach Is Applied with Families of Missing Persons</i>	58

Chapter 5: Dealing with the Stress of Working on the Plight of Missing Persons67

 Cumulative Stress Conditions 67

Cognitive Symptoms..... 67

Emotional Symptoms 67

Behavioral Symptoms68

Physical Symptoms.....68

Social Symptoms68

 Self-care Strategies68

 Staff Care for Those Working on the File of Missing Persons69

Core Principles of Staff Care69

Self-care Tips70

Closing Note.....71

References 72

List of Acronyms

ACT	Act for the Disappeared – Lebanon
ADD	Ante-Disappearance Data
AL	Ambiguous Loss
CFKDL	Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FOMP	Family of the missing person
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICTJ	International Center for Transitional Justice
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



Executive Summary

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) caused profound devastation, claiming over 100,000 lives and leaving thousands injured, displaced, or missing. For the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, the conflict’s impact endures as a relentless void—marked by unanswered questions about the fates of their loved ones. This prolonged uncertainty continues to inflict deep psychological, emotional, and social harm, obstructing reconciliation and peace.

In light of these challenges, this handbook offers trauma-informed guidelines to support the families of missing persons in Lebanon, emphasizing sensitivity and empathy at every step of the truth-seeking process. Designed for stakeholders engaged in uncovering the truth, including the Lebanese National Commission for the Missing and Disappeared and other advocacy groups, it aims to ensure that interventions are both reparative and mindful of the families’ complex and layered experiences of trauma.

Preface

General Introduction

On April 13, 1975, a war broke out in Lebanon which lasted over fifteen years and claimed the lives of more than one hundred thousand people. It also left thousands injured, disabled, and/or missing. The war came to an end with a national reconciliation agreement known as the Tae'f accord. Among the war's numerous victims are the missing and forcibly disappeared persons whose victimhood carries on to this day as the injustice is perpetuated by the absence of answers about their whereabouts. Mothers, fathers, siblings, wives, husbands... family and friends are left in the dark about the fates of their loved ones. Families suffer silently as the absence of answers over these crimes of enforced disappearances stands in the way of reconciliation and peace between the different communities.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) gives a comprehensive definition of a missing person:

“A missing person is a person whose whereabouts are unknown to his/her relatives and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, has been reported missing in accordance with the national legislation in connection with an international or non-international armed conflict, a situation of internal violence or disturbances, natural catastrophes or any other situation that may require the intervention of a competent State authority (ICRC, 2009).”

Since the end of the war, the file has gathered many advocates, both international and local. The “Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared” (CFKDL), established in 1982 by family members of missing persons, has become the longest-standing organization advocating for answers. It continues to lead efforts to address the plight of kidnapped and disappeared persons, representing their families' enduring struggle for justice and closure.

Another local institution is Act for the Disappeared (ACT) which was founded in 2010 with the aim of supporting the families of missing and disappeared persons in their demand to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. ACT also engages in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts to bring recognition to the victims, enabling collective healing and restoring social cohesion.

In November 2018, after nearly three decades of struggle and demands from the families of missing persons, and with the support of these actors, the Lebanese Parliament passed the Law for the Missing and Disappeared (Law 105/2018) that provided for the creation of a National Commission to investigate the fate and whereabouts of missing persons. In June 2020, the commission was established and was put in charge of:

- Clarifying what happened to the missing and forcibly disappeared persons,
- Locating and exhuming burial sites
- Identifying human remains and giving them back to their families and providing reparations to the families.
- Implement a truth-seeking process in the search for missing persons, including the exhumation of gravesites.

The families of missing persons continue to endure severe psychological harm caused by prolonged uncertainty regarding the fate of their loved ones, as well as economic, legal and administrative difficulties due to the disappearance(s). For decades their needs were not addressed, as they invested all their efforts to search for their missing loved ones, while receiving very little, if any, information from successive governments over time.

Purpose and Scope

Today, as different stakeholders partake in the truth-seeking process, there is a risk of re-traumatization¹, for the families, especially when burial sites will be exhumed. As such, it is crucial for all actors involved to adopt a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) informed approach, that is also cross cutting and trauma-informed, to avoid causing further harm to the families.

This handbook contextualizes the plight of the families of missing persons in Lebanon. It starts to describe their history and experiences and then delves into the psychosocial aspect while also give guidelines to sensitive and mindful approaches when supporting families who are a part of larger communities.

The goal is to collaborate with the Commission and other stakeholders, providing support and guidance to enhance their efforts in truth-seeking initiatives. It is vital to ensure that every action undertaken is designed and developed whilst taking into consideration the potential harmful impact at the individual, familial, and communal levels. The latter also ensures that these actions are reparatory in nature for the victims and do not cause unintentional harm. In summary, this handbook aims to:

1. Give a brief overview of the history of the Lebanese war and the plight of the families of missing persons from the war and outline the steps that led to the passing of Law 105 to provide the context for the second part of the handbook.
2. Provide guidelines and recommendations from a psychosocially sensitive, trauma-informed viewpoint during the accompaniment of the families through the truth-seeking process.

- (1) Re-traumatization is the reliving of the original trauma due to literal or symbolic triggers, causing the reliving of difficult emotions experienced at the time of the initial event or circumstance.

Why a Trauma-informed Approach?

A trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive approach is the core of this handbook and will be developed and expanded-on throughout. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more (APA, 2013).

According to “The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)”, which provides a comprehensive definition of trauma, it is “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

The definition of psychological trauma is not limited to diagnostic criteria, however. In fact, some clinicians have moved away from considering trauma-related symptoms as indicators of a mental disorder and instead view them as part of the normal human survival instinct or as “adaptive mental processes involved in the assimilation and integration of new information with intense survival emphasis which exposure to the trauma has provided” (Turnbull, 1998). These normal adaptive processes only become pathological if they are inhibited in some way, or if they are left unacknowledged and therefore untreated (Scott, 1990).

Perspectives on trauma vary widely depending on different sources and frameworks. For example, Horowitz defined it as “a sudden and forceful event that overwhelms a person’s ability to respond to it, recognizing that a trauma does not need to involve actual physical harm to oneself; an event can be traumatic if it contradicts one’s worldview and overpowers one’s ability to cope” (Horowitz 1989).

Families of missing persons from the Lebanese war have faced prolonged exposure to life-threatening events associated with the disappearances, including war, genocide, torture, forced migration, and systemic oppression. This has resulted in complex, sequential trauma, with each event compounding the impact of the original loss. Alongside the ongoing effects of the disappearances, families endured additional hardships during the war and, in some cases, risked their lives searching for their missing loved ones, further amplifying the psychological and emotional toll felt. In addition to the widespread nature of their trauma, its impact has been observed to be across several generations. Younger generations often grow up under the lasting influence of a missing relative, shaped by the ambiguity in their family’s history.

The diverse range of traumatic experiences faced necessitates a trauma-informed approach rather than a trauma-specific one. If the disappearance had occurred outside the context of war, a disappearance-specific approach might suffice. However, in the case of the Lebanese war, the broader and layered nature of trauma demands a more comprehensive framework to address the intertwined effects of both the disappearances and the conflict.

What is a Trauma-informed Approach?

It is an “approach that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment” (Hopper et al., 2010, p. 82).

To uphold the integrity of this specific approach, the following core trauma-informed principles are vital:

- **Safety** – Are the conditions of interaction with the families ensuring their emotional and physical safety?
- **Trust** – Are the stakeholders accountable for their actions with the families? Do the families feel a sense of reliability?
- **Choice** – Are the families provided with choices during specific moments? Are they empowered with a feeling of control?
- **Collaboration** – Are the families being engaged in the activities involved in the truth-seeking process?
- **Empowerment** – Are the families and their choices and opinions validated and affirmed even when they are not applied?
- **Respect for Diversity** – Are the diverse origins and backgrounds of the families respected?

Learning Objectives

To achieve the reparatory approach, this handbook aims to:

1. Educate stakeholders from diverse backgrounds on basic MHPSS definitions which are key to understanding the experience of disappearance on the individual, family and community levels.
2. Describe the common experiences of the family members from the historical, psychosocial, health, financial, legal and administrative facets.
3. Help stakeholders understand the risks faced in unraveling the truth and the opportunities for trauma processing and the potential for reconciliation within communities.
4. Help stakeholders devise a strategy for every step of the truth-seeking process that upholds a trauma-informed approach.
5. Support stakeholders in understanding the impact of these efforts on their own and their staff's wellbeing and mental state.

Chapter 1: Brief History of the Lebanese War, the Plight of the Missing and the Complexity in Terms of the Truth-seeking Process

“Societies do not have the luxury of not dealing with their past. If not dealt with proactively, the past will always haunt post-conflict societies”

(Paul van Zyl, 2006)

History is subjective, often shifting depending on the narrator. In the case of the Lebanese war, multiple versions of this event exist. There was no clear resolution, but rather an accord that ended the conflict. However, all sides endured significant losses, and this shared devastation remains a common point in the narrative of the war. Although the armed clashes ceased in 1990, more than 30 years later, the impact of the Lebanese war persists in various forms. It left countless victims without justice, and the truth about the events remains ambiguous, with numerous conflicting versions of each incident.

A Brief Historical Overview of the Lebanese War

Lebanon is a diverse country, with its residents belonging to various cultural and religious sects. The fear of any one group becoming a minority has been a significant factor contributing to the country's internal crises. In the years leading up to the Lebanese war, tensions heightened due to existential fears among various groups. Rival factions began arming themselves, receiving support from regional forces, which eventually led to the war's outbreak. On April 13, 1975, a failed assassination attempt on Pierre Gemayel, head of the Christian Kataeb Party, was followed by an ambush on a bus of mostly Palestinian civilians, resulting in 27 deaths. This sparked clashes between Palestinian-Muslim and Christian forces, igniting the Lebanese war.

What began as a civil war soon involved neighboring countries, which backed internal factions. Several external coalitions entered Lebanon, aiming to end the conflict, but they achieved only temporary solutions. As the situation worsened and peace efforts failed, Lebanon's government institutions fragmented. Militias grew in number, and intra-sectarian conflicts erupted as the fighting lost its clear objectives. On September 22, 1989, the Arab League brokered a ceasefire, and leaders met in Saudi Arabia to sign the Tae'f Accord, which redistributed governing powers among the sects, bringing an end to the clashes.

On August 26, 1991, the Lebanese government passed a general amnesty law (Law 84/91), pardoning all war crimes committed during the war. This law effectively hindered accountability and transitional justice for victims and survivors, including those affected by enforced disappearances. While enforced

disappearance is a continuous crime, allowing legal recourse for the families of the missing, the amnesty law, coupled with fears of reprisals, serves as a strong deterrent, preventing families from pursuing legal action against the perpetrators₂.

The Case of Missing Persons from The Lebanese War

“There can be no justice without truth and no justice without reconciliation.”
(Ghassan Moukheiber, 2006)

During the 15 years of armed conflict, thousands went missing, leaving tens of thousands of loved ones searching for answers and struggling to move on from their painful past. The ambiguity surrounding the fate of the disappeared stems from several factors:

- **Motivation of the kidnappings:** The disappearances could have been sectarian, politically motivated, or personal. When carried out by militias, they might have been deliberate or the result of rogue actions by fighters.
- **Unknown locations of disappearance:** People were taken at checkpoints, off the streets, from their homes, or during military invasions of areas controlled by opposing militias. Arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial executions, and disappearances were common in many locations.
- **Diverse perpetrators:** The perpetrators came from varied backgrounds. Some families believe their loved ones were killed immediately or soon after their abduction, often hidden in mass graves to traumatize the enemy. Others suspect that their relatives were imprisoned in Syrian or Israeli detention centers.
- **Diverse victims:** The victims included Lebanese, Palestinians, and people from other Arab nationalities, as well as Europeans and Americans.
- **Rumors and misinformation:** During the war, rumors about the fate of missing persons spread rapidly, often fueled by political groups and militias, exacerbating sectarian tensions and influencing the actions of young fighters on the frontlines.

In the absence of accountability, those responsible for the injustices of the war later became the ruling powers of the post-war country.

Major Events Leading to Disappearances

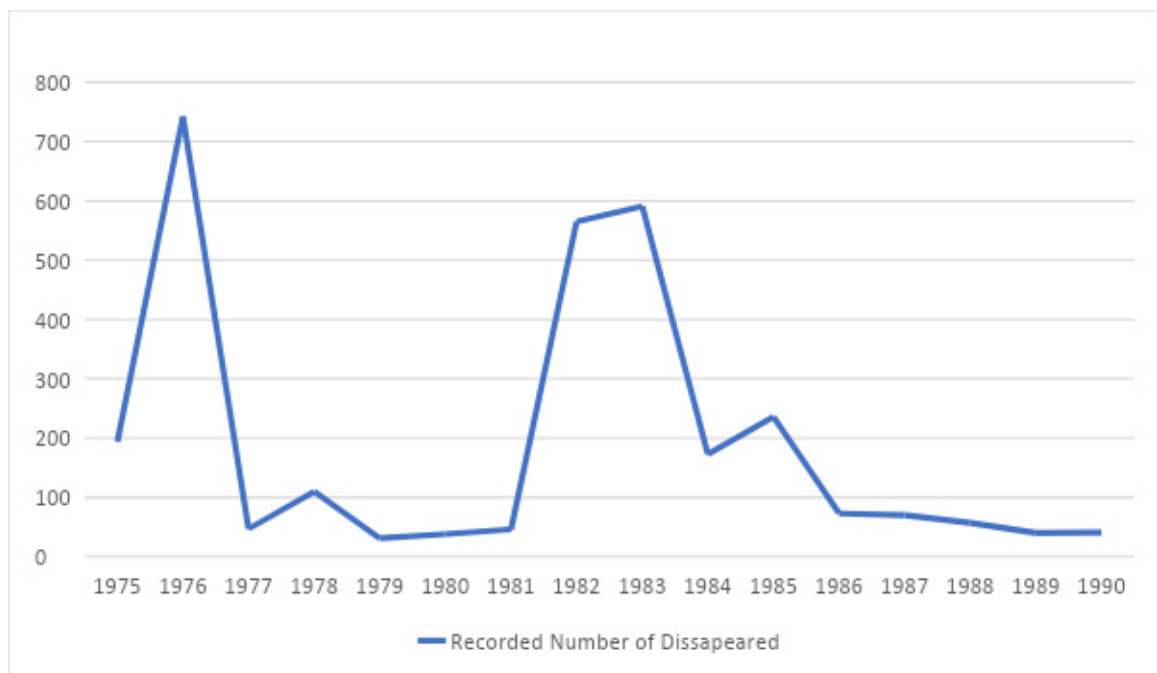
Enforced disappearances occurred throughout the civil war, beginning in the early years when sectarian and Lebanese-Palestinian violence drove abductions and disappearances. The recorded numbers of missing persons are approximated and based on various sources₃. More significant than the precise numbers are the trends, showing the large-scale nature of these disappearances.

- (2) Amnesty cannot apply to perpetrators of ongoing crimes, and the crime of disappearances is an ongoing one as long as the fate of the disappeared has not been disclosed”, see Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, Lebanon Enforced Disappearances and Incommunicado Detentions, February 21, 2008, P.36, http://www.rightsobserver.org/files/CLDH_Enforced_Disappearance_EN_2008.pdf

- (3) Act for the Disappeared's database.

THE MISSING IN NUMBERS.

OUT OF 1,562 RESEARCHED CASES



Some of the major events linked to observable peaks in these disappearances are outlined below:

Sabet El Aswad – Black Saturday (1975)

In retaliation for the killing of four Christian men, Christian militias attacked the Beirut port area, massacring Lebanese Muslims and Palestinians.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: 300-400 people.

Khamis el Aswad – Black Thursday (1975)

This marked the beginning of widespread sectarian violence, executions, and abductions following the killing of a Palestinian man in downtown Beirut. Both sides set up roadblocks and committed massacres.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: around 50 people.

Karantina Massacre (1976)

Christian militias attacked the Karantina slums, then under the control of the Palestine Liberation Organization, killing all Muslims in the area.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: 1500 people.

Damour Massacre (1976)

In retaliation for the Karantina massacre, Palestinian militias invaded the town of Damour and surrounding areas, killing most of the Christians.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: 500-600 people.

Tal El Zaatar and Jisr El Basha (1976)

Christian militias besieged the Tal El Zaatar and Jisr El Basha Palestinian refugee camps. Thousands of Palestinians were killed, executed, or abducted during their exodus before reaching West Beirut.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: 1500-5000 people.

Sabra and Chatila (1982)

After the assassination of President-elect Bachir Gemayel, Christian militias, with Israeli support, besieged and massacred Palestinian and Lebanese inhabitants in the Sabra and Shatila camps.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: 3500 people.

Hareb El Jabal – War of the Mountains (1983)

Following the Israeli withdrawal, the war between Christian and Druze militias intensified, resulting in thousands of deaths and the enforced disappearance of around 2700 civilians.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: 3000-4000 people.

Christian Civilians Executed in Jiyeh, Alman, and Other Villages (1985)

An undetermined number of civilians were forcibly hidden during an invasion of coastal, mostly Christian villages, south of Beirut.

War of the Camps (1985)

Clashes between Lebanese Shiite militias and Palestinian Liberation Organizations began in 1984 and peaked in 1985, resulting in the killing and abduction of an estimated 3800 people.

The events that led to disappearances during the Lebanese war spanned both before and after its official end. However, the major internal conflicts outlined here serve as the backdrop to the injustices of enforced disappearances. Lebanon's people were marked by tribal divisions, long-standing sectarian grievances, and resentment from pre-war injustices, exacerbated by the presence of foreign armed groups and neighboring countries' interventions.

Efforts to Uncover the Truth and Steps Taken by Authorities

Years after the war's end, many families have continued to search for answers. The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared (CFKD) is the key actor representing a large number of missing persons' families. The committee was formed after Wadad Halawani's, wife to the missing Adnan Halawani, call to other relatives in 1982, which led to the creation of the CFKD on October 25, 1982. Since its formation, the committee has advocated for truth through public protests and meetings with political figures. Over time, its activities became more organized, and in 2009, it adopted a legal approach to advocate for a draft law on the missing. In 2018, Law 105 was passed to establish an independent National Commission to clarify the fate of the disappeared.

Previous Attempts by Authorities

- **1984-1987:** Special committees were formed but failed to provide significant results, except for one report listing 764 detainees.
- **1991:** A police report listed 17,415 disappeared persons, but the list was found to contain duplicates and inaccuracies.
- **1995:** A law allowed families to declare their missing loved ones as dead.
- **2000:** After CFKD's pressure, the government formed an "Official Commission of Investigation into the Fate of the Abducted and Disappeared Persons." The committee issued a statement in which it declared that all the missing individuals were no longer alive and that their families should announce their deaths. The committee confirmed the existence of mass graves and identified three locations for these graves. A list of the missing individuals was sent, via the International Committee of the Red Cross, to Syria and Israel, both of which denied having any information about them.
- **2001:** Another commission received requests for 700 missing persons but issued no official statements.
- **2005:** A Lebanese-Syrian committee was formed to investigate 600 missing persons thought to be imprisoned in Syria, but again, no statements were made.

Law 105 and Its Impact

In 2018, Law 105/2018 legalized the right to know the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons, including the right to compensation and non-discrimination. It established a National Commission with a humanitarian mandate to investigate the fates of the missing and prevent future cases. The law also set standards for identifying and protecting the deceased, according to international protocols.

As time passes, the older generations of those closest to the missing are aging, making the need for action more pressing. With consolidated data, biological samples⁴ and the support of various actors, the commission is now better equipped to pursue its objectives.

- (4) A person directly inherits their DNA from their parents. Each of them has their own DNA, except for identical and monozygotic twins.

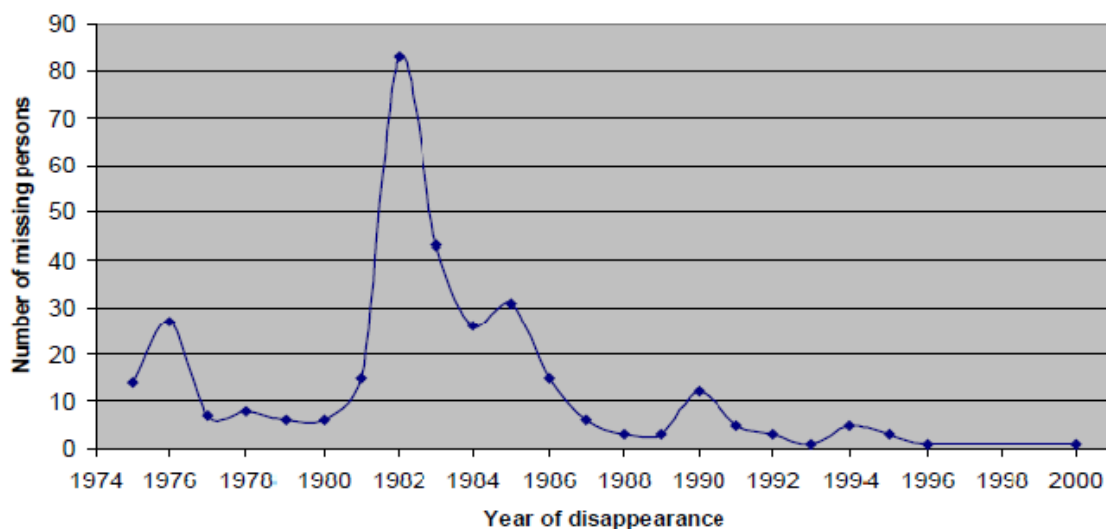
Chapter 2: Scope of Needs of Families of Missing Persons

This chapter presents the findings and recommendations from two key needs assessments. The first, conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), over 20 years after the Lebanese war, aimed to identify the needs of the families of the missing and establish a framework for addressing the missing person issue with the Lebanese authorities.

The second assessment, completed by ACT for the Disappeared in 2021, followed the passing of Law 105/2018 and the establishment of the National Commission, focused on providing actionable recommendations for reparative measures.

The excerpts are taken from the original documents without amendments:

ICRC Family Needs Assessment Findings and Recommendations - 2013



The present report reflects the needs of the families of missing people in Lebanon, as assessed by the ICRC between August 2011 and June 2012. It presents the main findings in order to give insight into the families' needs. It also sets out recommendations on how to meet those needs. The findings of the assessment were already shared with the Lebanese authorities, followed by a series of recommendations specifically addressed to them.

The objective of the present report is to share the outcome of the assessment with a wider range of stakeholders interested in the issue of missing people and their families.

This report includes a summary of the main recommendations that were addressed earlier to the Lebanese authorities, and a new set of recommendations addressed to all other stakeholders, in particular the families themselves, the family associations, NGOs, as well as embassies, UN agencies, charities and private companies interested in financing projects that address the needs of the families of missing people.

Since a coordinated and coherent response is essential for achieving results, the ICRC hopes that this report will contribute to generate an integrated effort to meet the needs of the families of missing people.

The ICRC supplemented its own information on missing people with information from other organizations working on the issue and with names received from the authorities. This combined list ultimately contained over 3,500 names and formed the basis for the selection of a representative sample of families interviewed by the ICRC for the family-needs assessment. As far as possible, the sample reflects geographical proportionality. It contains only cases of missing people for which the contact details of a family member were available.

The information from the families was collected on questionnaires that had been adapted to the Lebanese context and translated into Arabic. The questionnaire included multiple-choice and open questions on the disappearance, the difficulties faced by the family as a result (including psychological, social, economic, administrative and legal problems), the search already carried out, and any action taken by the authorities in response to the family's situation.

Interviews with 324 families were conducted between September 2011 and January 2012 by specially trained ICRC staff. In addition, three group discussions were held, focusing on the families' needs in their social environment and on what they expected from the authorities.

Before conducting the interview, the families were informed about the general purpose of the information collection and the ways the information would be used. Stress was laid on the confidentiality of the individual data. Each participant received a leaflet explaining these points and written individual consent was requested from all interviewees. Participation was voluntary.

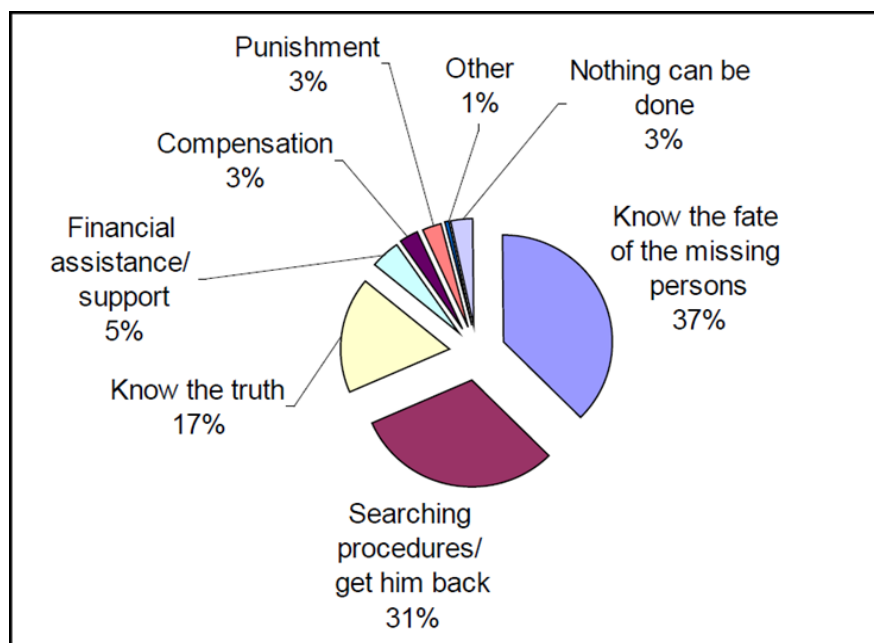
Despite the diversity of the people interviewed in terms of social background, geographical location, age, gender, etc., and given that the disappearances occurred over a long period of time (1975-2000) in markedly varying circumstances, the interviewees' replies regarding their needs were extraordinarily consistent.

The main problem facing the individual family members was the emotional distress created by the absence of their loved one and the psychological difficulty of coping with uncertainty about their fate. This is particularly remarkable given the average time elapsed since the disappearance. The peaks were, as illustrated above, in the 1970s and 1980s, i.e. more than 25 to 35 years ago. Yet these families were still suffering emotionally and psychologically and having difficulties within their social environment. This demonstrates that it is impossible for the families to find relief without answers about the fate of their loved ones.

However, all initiatives to search for the missing have so far been fruitless and remain unpromising in the near future. Thus, “hearing the truth” and “doing something to find him and get him back” were the major needs expressed by families and were always mentioned before any other request, especially before requests for financial or material support.

Main Findings

Figure 3: The figure shows the main actions prioritized by families of the missing.



Need to know

We need to know; we can't just stay lost and uncertain. If someone told me anything, I wouldn't believe it and I will remain lost until I see the body.

(Sister of a missing person)

I want to know the facts, to find the truth. What happened, happened. But they should check whether he is still alive somewhere. If he is, they should help us. If there are any prisoners left alive, bring them back to us.

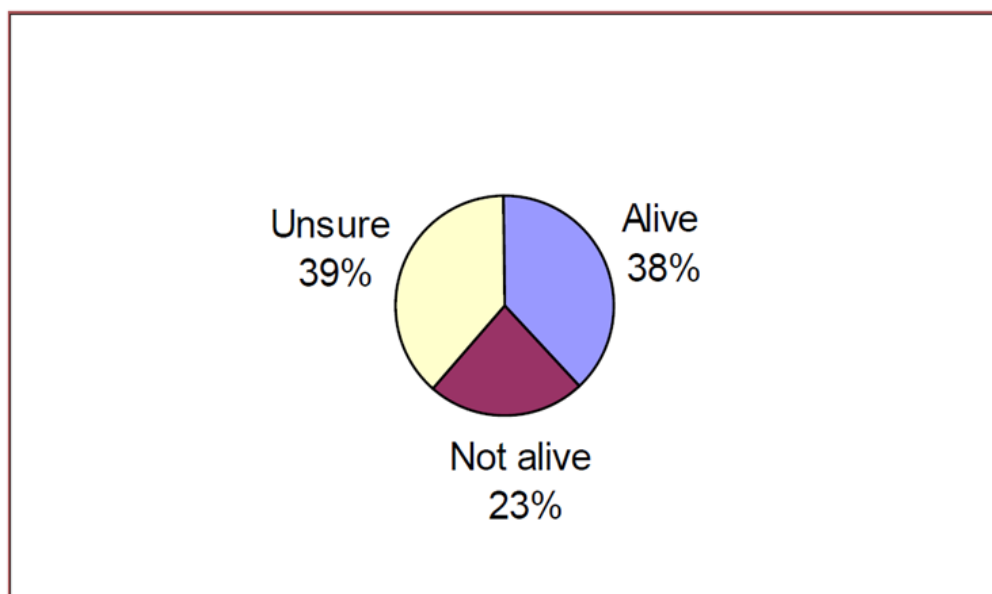
We've heard from people we trust that there have been people who were released from Syria after 15 years of detention.

(Brother of a missing person)

While the families of the dead can mourn their loss and move forward by rebuilding their lives, the families of the missing often see no end to their suffering. Families without news are often reluctant to accept or even consider the possibility that their loved ones are dead. As a result, they live in a wavering state of intermittent hope and despair. Obviously, this condition seriously affects their personal lives.

Most interviewees believed that their missing relative was still alive or were at least unsure about what had happened to him (77%, see pie chart below). Though they realized that the probability of him being dead was high, this second group refused to give up hope of seeing him alive again. Only 23% of the interviewees thought it probable that the missing relative was dead, this often because they had received credible but unconfirmed information from others.

Figure 4: The figure shows what families believe happened to their missing relative.



Almost all the families interviewed (97%) had actively searched for their missing relative at some point – the few who said that they had not searched (only 10 of the 324 families) had not been able to do so because of the security situation or because they did not know how to go about it. Searching meant spending considerable amounts of money and time travelling from one place to another – including Syria. Unfortunately, some family members put their faith in strangers who claimed to have information on their missing relative but were, in fact, trying to make money from unconfirmed information. The families exhausted all avenues of research, approaching the police, the army and judicial authorities as well as political parties and religious figures. Some families had been searching for decades, and roughly half (45% of those interviewed) confirmed that they were still searching today. Others had given up at some point after losing hope of finding their loved one by themselves, or because they had other – mostly health-related – problems that prevented them from searching.

When appropriate, the interviewees were asked what they would require if it turned out that their missing relative was indeed dead. 60% replied that they would like to see the body. This would necessitate identification of gravesites, exhumation and identification. For 75% of the families, it was important to find the gravesite or, if the relative was still alive, at least to learn where he was. Almost 70% said it was “very important” for them to receive the body of their loved one, both for religious and psychological reasons.

All these findings show that concrete and credible information on the fate and the whereabouts of the missing person is of utmost importance to the families.

Until they receive satisfactory information that allows them to come to terms with the disappearance, the families' convictions regarding their missing relative should be respected.

Psychological and Emotional Needs

I became a mother and a father at the same time.

(Wife of a missing person)

I used to envy anyone who had a father. I always felt that I somehow wasn't complete because I didn't have a father.

(Son of a missing person)

The interviews showed that the families of missing people were deeply affected emotionally and psychologically. Their description of the difficulties they faced, their efforts to overcome them and their struggle to cope with the loss of their loved one were striking and poignant. Their suffering manifested itself in specific problems. Between 60% and 85% said they often suffered from headaches, sleep problems, nervousness, excessive worry about small things, general fatigue and general unhappiness. They attributed their suffering directly to the uncertainty about their missing loved one. In particular, brothers and sisters of missing people often said that sadness had helped cause the death of parents, who never learned what had happened to a son or daughter.

While for a majority of interviewees (around 60%), the relationship within their family and with social circles had not been negatively affected, others expressed situations of long-lasting and unaddressed relational difficulties with family members and/or with neighbours, colleagues or others.

Various burdens were involved: having to search alone, dealing with the many practical consequences of the disappearance, the alternating hope and fear, and – as time passed – the disappointment and growing despair. The interviewees described feelings of mistrust towards others, of guilt, and of regret. Whether these families were shunned by other members of the community or whether they themselves simply lost interest in community life – or both – the result was the same.

Wives of missing men faced particular difficulties shouldering responsibility for their family alone. Their status was unclear: wife or widow? People often lacked understanding for their plight. They suffered social rejection, disrespect and sometimes even harassment from those around them. Many found their lives gradually reduced to the search for their missing husband and the struggle to meet their children's needs.

Slightly more than half of the interviewees mentioned religion and religious rituals as their greatest comfort. Most interviewees (67%) said they were able to share their personal difficulties not only with their families but also with the broader social circle. However, 80% said that issues relating to their missing relative were discussed only within the family circle.

The interviewees were reluctant to bring such a sensitive and potentially stigmatizing issue outside of the close-knit domestic realm. While many found that discussing their feelings within the family was enough to adequately deal with the emotional implications, others needed additional support.

Even when they did not express an explicit desire for psychological or psychosocial support, the results showed a need for this in some cases.

Financial Distress

Just when my father went missing, my mother suffered a stroke and went into a coma for 20 days. Her continuing ill-health meant that my sister had to work to support our family. Both my sister and brother left school because we weren't financially able to pay for further education. There was no-one to support us – we had lost the family's only breadwinner. My father's employer gave us his monthly pay for a whole year afterward, but then it stopped.

(Daughter of a missing person)

My husband owns land, but in order to be able to sell it or put it to use we need to pay the taxes and provide a death certificate. The house we are living in now is also my husband's property and we have the burden of paying taxes on it. If we don't, the government may decide to seize it, and then we will be without a roof. So far, we haven't been able to settle the inheritance issue because the procedures involved are expensive and include issuing of a death certificate, which I refuse to have done.

(Wife of a missing person)

Although the economic consequences so many years after the disappearance were difficult to establish in the limited framework of this study, 78% of the families interviewed said they had financial problems due to the disappearance. The interviewees said the disappearance had had definite, major financial consequences mainly on two levels:

First, the family had often lost its breadwinner. Half of the missing people whose families are included in this assessment were married at the time of their disappearance and left behind a wife and three to four children.

Second, 72% of the missing people concerned by this assessment were employed, had their own business, or earned their money as day labourers. Only 10% of the missing people were unemployed, and 16% were students.

Of the 254 families who stated they had had financial problems, two thirds said those problems were due to the loss of the breadwinner, an absence that sometimes, for example, prevented the remaining parent from offering her children the best possible education. It necessitated that one child or more would have had to stop school and contribute to the family income instead. In the longer run, this generally meant a lower income for those children than what they would have had if they had received more education. Furthermore, the disappearance of a potential breadwinner, especially a son who could help his parents when they grew old, negatively affects parents economically today.

At the same time, the search for the missing person incurred considerable costs for the families, money that could have been spent to meet other important needs. Half the families confirmed that they had spent sizable sums on search-related travel as well as on informants who promised details about the fate and whereabouts of the missing person or offered to sell them supposed personal belongings of the missing person. Any money spent in this way was then unavailable for other expenses.

Another financial burden involved taxes on properties of the missing people, which continued to apply after the disappearance, before the families were able to transfer them to their name. Owing to the lengthiness of the procedures involved, people ultimately inherited huge, cumulated tax bills. Some people were obliged to sell possessions or take out a loan to pay those taxes. Many were still struggling to pay overdue taxes.

As mentioned above, family members suffer psychologically from the disappearance of their loved one, but they also frequently suffer physical illness. Many attributed this directly to trauma caused by the disappearance. These health problems created an additional strain on the family budget and were the first issue mentioned when the families were asked how they manage to meet their basic needs such as housing, food and water, education and health care. Two thirds of the interviewees mentioned health care as the most pressing economic need (over half of the interviewees were receiving regular treatment). This posed difficulties even for families who had medical insurance. And the need for medical care will only increase in future as the family members grow older.

Key Recommendations to the Lebanese Authorities

In an effort to put an end to the uncertainty experienced by the families of missing persons and in line with Lebanon's obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law, the ICRC urges the authorities to take the necessary measures to prevent disappearances during armed conflicts or other situations of violence, uncover the fate and whereabouts of individuals who disappeared during the armed conflicts since 1975, and address the needs of their families by providing them with the necessary support.

The ICRC encourages the Lebanese authorities to consider ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and incorporating its provisions into national legislation.

Establishing a Mechanism to Uncover the Fate and Whereabouts of Missing Persons

The ICRC supports the Lebanese government in its efforts to establish a mechanism dedicated to searching for missing persons, clarifying their fate and whereabouts, and informing their families of the findings. The ICRC recommends that such a mechanism work in the best interests of the families of missing persons and include the following elements:

- The mechanism should have a clearly defined mandate centered around the humanitarian goal of providing families of missing persons with answers about the fate and whereabouts of their relatives.
- The mandate should be non-discriminatory. The mechanism must clarify the fate and whereabouts of all persons who went missing due to armed conflicts – both international and non-international – and other situations of violence.

To meet all families' need for truth, the ICRC calls for using the broader term "missing persons," which includes those who have been forcibly disappeared, those "missing in action" (armed forces personnel and combatants from opposing groups whose families have no information about them), and all those reported missing in direct relation to an armed conflict or other situations of violence.

- The mechanism should establish a centralized and comprehensive list of all persons missing as a result of armed conflicts – both international and non-international – or other situations of violence, based on information gathered from various sources such as official records, families and family associations, and non-governmental organizations.
- The information gathered by the mechanism must remain confidential and be used solely for the purpose of clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing persons. Personal data collected must be processed and analyzed in compliance with internationally agreed principles for personal data protection and national laws.
- The mechanism should be granted the necessary resources and authority to coordinate, support, and oversee search operations for missing persons and to inform families of the findings.
- The mechanism should possess the skills and resources required to collect information about burial sites, whether individual or mass graves where the remains of missing persons may be located.
- The mechanism should develop a comprehensive strategy for locating, recovering, and identifying remains based on the best scientific practices adapted to the context. These practices should include relevant provisions for returning identified remains to families and ensuring dignified burial for remains that are unidentified or unclaimed.
- The mechanism should also establish dialogue with authorities in other concerned countries to search for persons believed to be in another country.
- The mechanism should maintain regular dialogue with families of missing persons and take the initiative to inform them of its goals, operations, procedures, and findings.
- The mechanism should also have a mandate to assist families of missing persons in addressing their various needs, as outlined in subsequent recommendations.

The ICRC is currently engaged in gathering “ante-disappearance” data and preserving it. This includes plans to collect biological reference samples from relatives. It is expected that this will help preserve information that may ultimately lead to the identification of missing persons. The ICRC considers that transferring the information collected to this mechanism will depend on meeting the above-mentioned conditions regarding the non-discriminatory and humanitarian mandate of the mechanism, ensuring that its work always serves the best interests of the families of missing persons.

Taking the Necessary measures to Address Administrative and Legal Problems

- The authorities should define a clear and recognized legal status for missing persons, enabling families to address issues arising from their relatives’ absence, such as access to social assistance and enjoyment of rights related to property, inheritance, family status, healthcare, and education, without the need to declare the missing person deceased. A “certificate of absence” can be issued to establish the legal status of the missing person, holding the same legal validity as a death certificate. Families wishing to obtain this certificate should be able to do so through simple and free procedures (also applicable to any required judicial approval and investigations or announcements in newspapers).
- Families should be able to obtain all necessary information and support for issuing a certificate of absence through local authorities (such as mukhtars). Authorities must ensure that local civil entities are well-informed about these procedures and the benefits of the certificate of absence compared to a death certificate and guide families accordingly.
- Consideration should be given to establishing a centralized official administration for providing information and support to families. This administration can advise on administrative and legal matters to help families resolve issues arising from the disappearance of their relatives, such as

those related to property (inheritance), pensions, social security, marriage, etc.

- Once the mechanism begins its work, such an administrative and legal advisory administration should become part of it.

Recommendations to the Lebanese Authorities and Other Relevant Parties

The following recommendations require understanding and active support from civil society and all relevant stakeholders, particularly family associations, non-governmental organizations, international organizations involved in programs to assist the families of missing persons, and donors funding these programs.

Providing Psychological and Psychosocial Support

- Authorities should recognize the importance of facilitating access for families of missing persons to psychological and psychosocial care and ensure they are informed about such services, which can be offered by specialized government institutions and/or other entities.
- Authorities and all relevant organizations should guarantee easy access to these services for relatives who wish to use them.
- Authorities are encouraged to establish a psychosocial support network organized and managed by local government entities, family associations, NGOs, or international organizations.
- Authorities, with the assistance of civil society organizations, should ensure the provision of appropriate psychological support services for family members in need. This support may take the form of individual or family therapy or another type of group therapy. Its effectiveness depends on how well it addresses the “uncertainty” experienced by families regarding the fate of their relatives.

Providing Healthcare

- Lebanese authorities, with the assistance of civil society organizations, should guarantee that all family members of missing persons benefit from health insurance that ensures free access to healthcare services.

Acknowledging the Special Status of Families of Missing Persons

- The ICRC calls on the Lebanese authorities and Lebanese society as a whole to recognize the prolonged suffering of families of missing persons and their right to receive news and assistance.
- The ICRC encourages civil society organizations to continue their efforts to support families in public events and to persist in advocating for respect for the rights of families and addressing their demands.
- The ICRC urges all relevant stakeholders to support the implementation of the above recommendations. These recommendations not only address the special needs of families of missing persons and acknowledge their decades of suffering but also have practical value in meeting the core needs of these families.

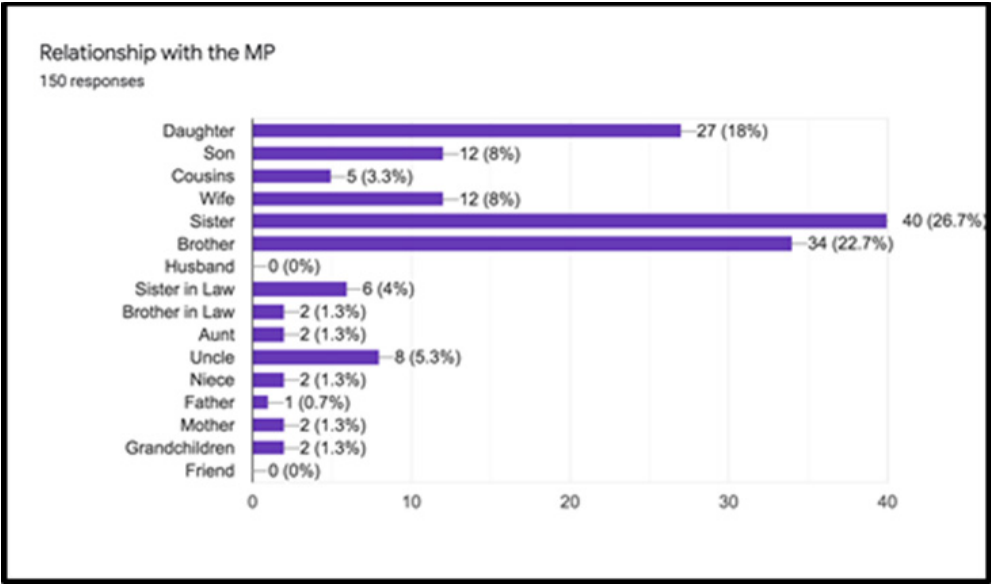
Act for the Disappeared Family Needs Assessment Findings and Recommendations-2021

In 2021, Act for the Disappeared began a consultation aimed at understanding the different impacts of disappearances on family members and at assessing their needs. The consultation also aimed to understand the needs and expectations of families of missing and disappeared persons from the newly appointed National Commission. On the basis of the results, recommendations for reparations were be developed.

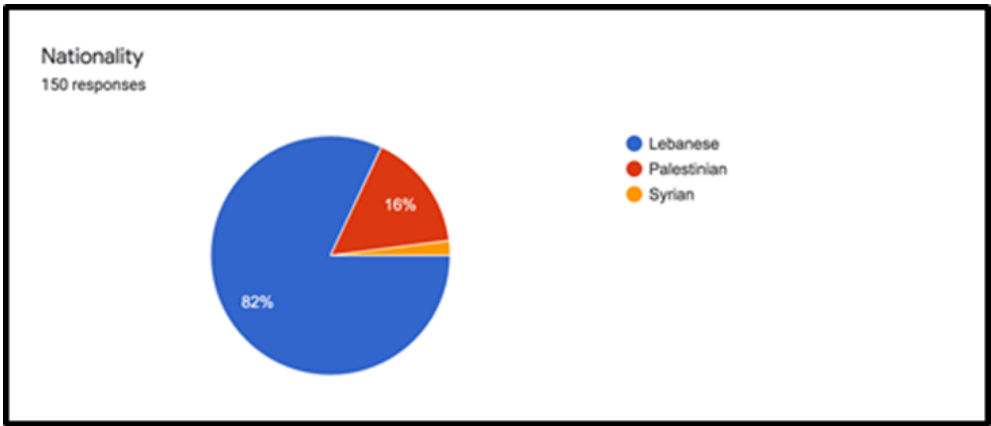
For the consultation ACT has worked with four field officers to act as focal points for families in their different communities in many districts in Lebanon. They conducted both online and in-person interviews with family members of missing persons and collected information about their needs and sociodemographic characteristics.

Facts and Figures

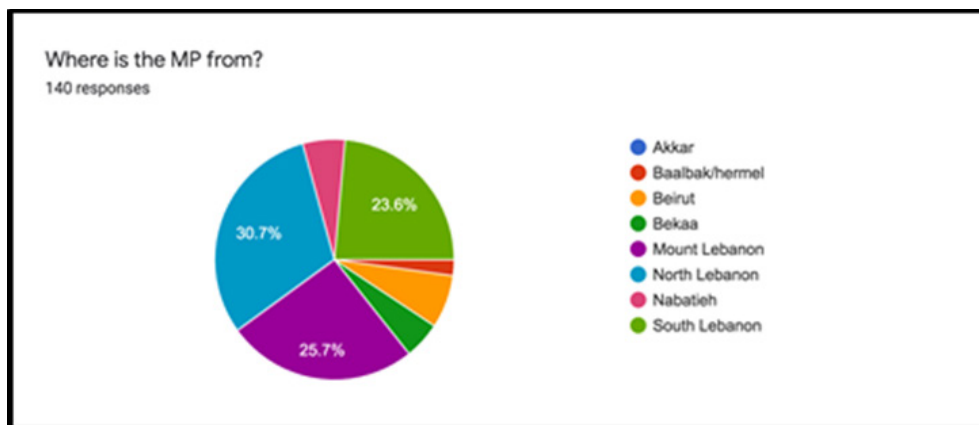
The consultation reached 150 family members from different sociodemographic characteristics. ACT interviewed participants that are related directly or indirectly to the missing persons. The siblings of the missing persons mainly participated in this consultation in addition to the daughters, wives, and sons. This is shown clearly in the below graph:



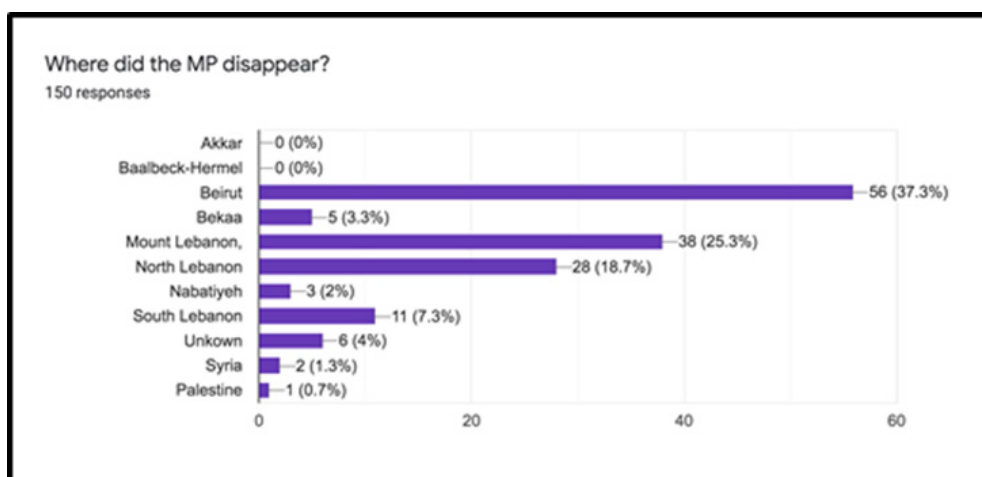
Most of the families were Lebanese (82%), and the remaining were Palestinian and Syrians.



The majority of the missing persons the family members were interviewed about are from the North, South, and Mount Lebanon.



Most of the disappeared were civilians (89%), and the rest were either soldiers in the Lebanese army or fighters within one of the many armed groups that were fighting at that time. It was noticed that a high percentage of the abductions and cases of missing persons happened in the region of Beirut (37.3%), Mount Lebanon (25.3%), and North Lebanon (18.7%).



Impact of the Disappearance

As a result of the disappearance, the families of the missing persons suffer many challenges. This consultation revealed that the families' greatest struggles link back to financial difficulties (24.6%), and social difficulties with family members (72.7%) and with community members (36.6%). The assessment also showed that some of them are still suffering from legal challenges (24.6%).

Impact on Parents

The parents of the missing persons stated how the disappearance of their child had a significant impact on the parents' social and emotional roles and on the continuity of the family. Many of the family members shared that their parents and siblings suffered from physical pain, psychological anguish, and emotional burden of the loss. They were also susceptible to economic disempowerment and social discrimination.

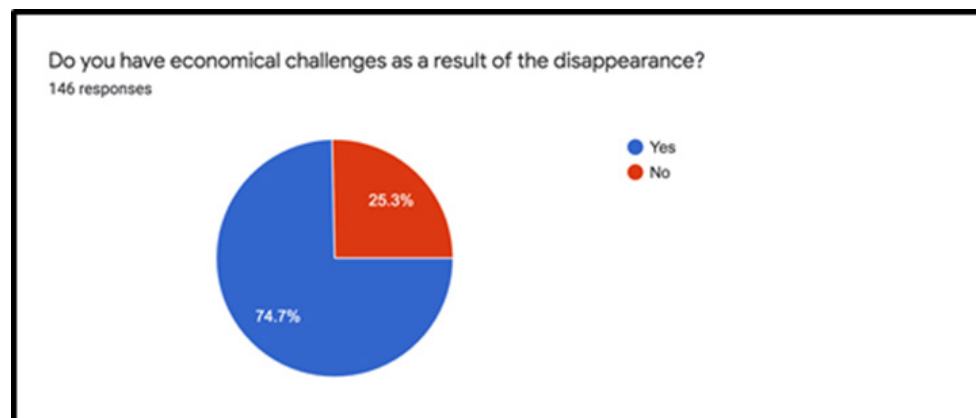
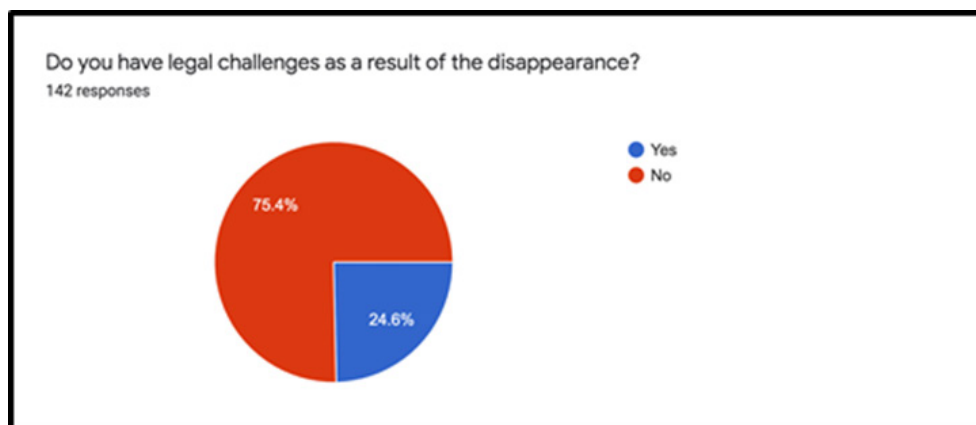
Impact on Siblings

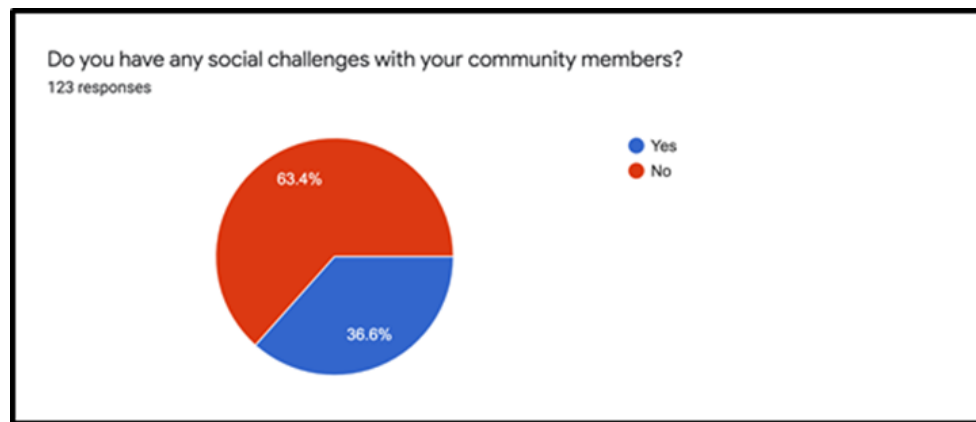
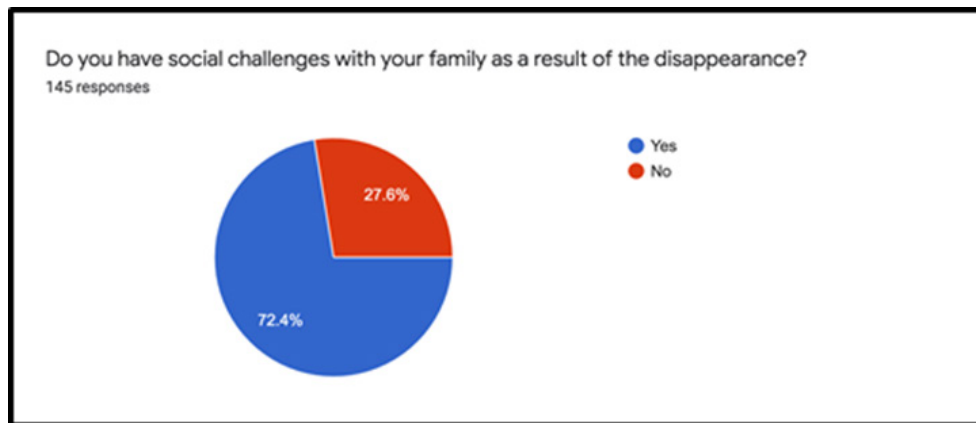
Many of them had to leave school to work and provide an income for their families which changed their role within the family. Others had to move to orphanages or lost all their savings in paying for people who promised to help in finding their missing. Their family life became very difficult and full of sadness. The feeling of uncertainty was a major stress which led to physical and mental exhaustion. The wives of missing men struggled to take responsibility for their family alone. Their status was unclear and often suffered from social rejection, disrespect or harassment.

The majority often suffered from headaches, sleep disorders, nervousness, excessive worry about small things, general fatigue and general unhappiness. Many of them mentioned that the loss helped them become closer to some members in their families such as a sibling.

Legal Challenges

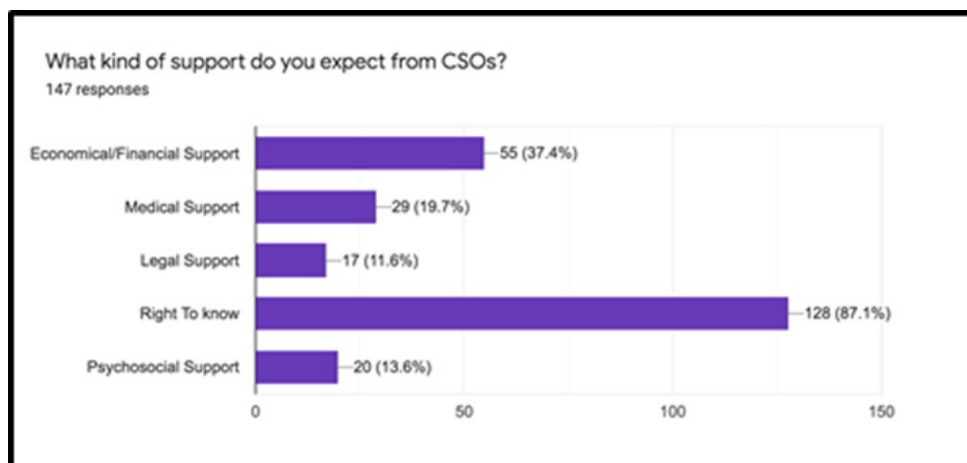
This consultation highlighted the legal challenges that contributed to creating more financial difficulties due to the absence of a legal status for the “missing” person. This legal gap caused a wide array of problems related to property and inheritance rights, pension and social security rights, the right to enter a new union, parental rights, issuing death certificates etc. At least 10% of the families shared that in order to overcome these problems, the only option that they were left with was to declare their missing loved ones dead to get a death certificate. Most of them refused and still cannot exercise their rights.





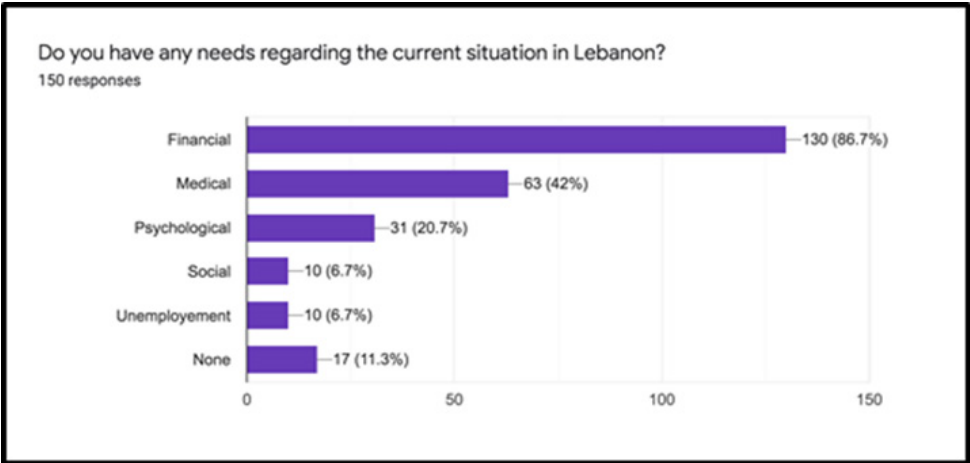
The Families' Needs and Expectations from CSOs and the National Commission

The consultation created an opportunity for the families to express their needs and expectations from the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the National Commission. It brought attention to the right to know: the majority of the family members still consider the right to know as a priority and a need (87.1%). The rest had stopped after losing hope searching alone or because of health-related problems that prevented them from doing so.

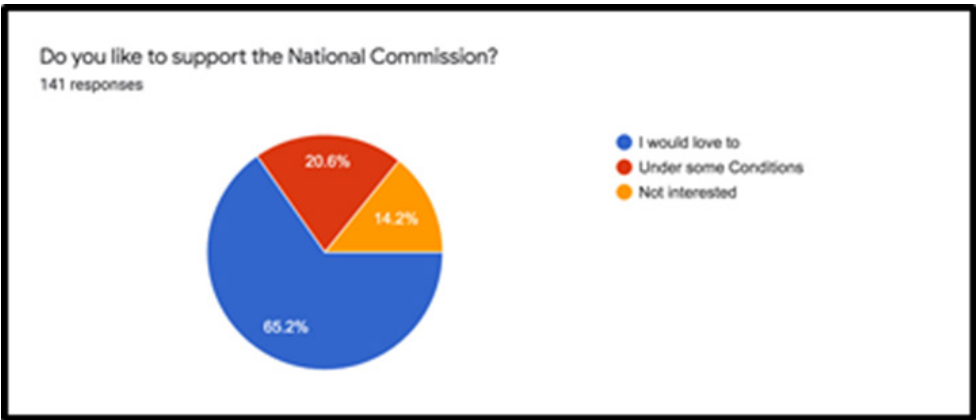


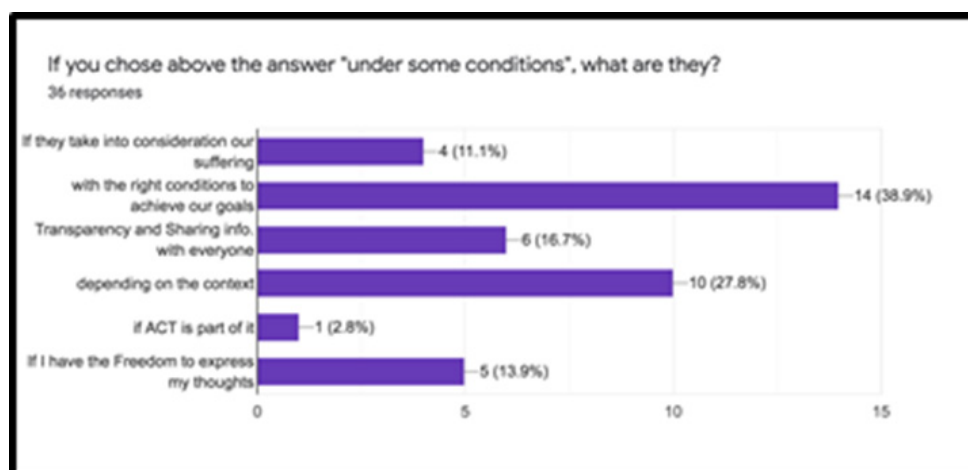
In Lebanon, because of the current difficult economic and political situation, 86.7% of the participants showed interest in receiving financial help. Many of them lost their jobs or their salaries are not enough to provide them with their basic needs. Also, many families were unable to cover their children’s educational costs, which led them to leave school in order to contribute to family income instead. This makes these children today more prone to lose their jobs due to the economic crisis.

Many also asked for medical support (42%) as the medicines are expensive and are no longer subsidized by the government due to the Lebanese currency crisis. It is even hard for them to provide medicines for their family members that suffer from critical and chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.



The needs assessment provided an opportunity for the families to express their views about the establishment of the National Commission. 92% of the families shared that the appointment of the Commissioners made them feel happy and hopeful. 65.2% of the families stated that they are ready to support the commission if certain conditions are taken into consideration such as transparency and the type of context (see graph below).





Recommendations

The families of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons have various needs that have to be addressed by the state and by civil society actors working to support it. These needs include the need to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones, the need to receive economic, psychological and psychosocial support, the need for justice and reparation and the need to conduct commemorative rituals.

The actions that will be taken by the National Commission once it is operational should be based on a clear understanding of the demands and needs of the families and should be adapted to each context. The actions should adopt a cross-cutting psychosocial perspective. It means that each and every action undertaken should be designed and developed by taking into consideration its potential impact at the individual, familial, community and social levels in order to ensure that these actions are reparatory in nature for the victims (direct and families) and for the society as a whole.

This perspective should be adopted by the different stakeholders and professionals, including institutional and civil society actors, in each of the intervening fields (forensic specialists, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, doctors, criminologists, among others).

Need to Know

Families of missing and disappeared persons need to know what happened to their loved ones, to have them released if they are alive and if they are dead to retrieve their body or remains. It is a right enshrined in international law. The right to the truth is further defined by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances as the right to know the fate and the whereabouts of the disappeared persons, the circumstances of the disappearances, the cause of death and the identity of the perpetrator(s).

The search process itself can either further exacerbate the harm suffered by the family members or has a reparatory effect. Therefore, it is essential to minimize risks of negative impacts.

The search therefore requires special procedures, experience and knowledge that meet the particular needs of vulnerable persons. It should be organized efficiently and be coordinated in order to avoid requesting the same information numerous times and the risk of re-victimization of family members.

Upon completion of the necessary investigative procedures, the body or remains of a disappeared person should be handed over to the family members under decent conditions, in accordance with the cultural norms and customs of the victims.

Psychological and Psychosocial Needs

Families of missing and disappeared persons are particularly vulnerable, and they should be supported and protected during the different phases of the search process.

People responsible for the search should take into account the risks of physical and mental health that families and their community may face throughout the search process, especially those stemming from the discovery of the fate of their loved ones or from the frustration of not uncovering any information.

The search should therefore include psychological care and psychosocial support to prevent their revictimization and should follow clear protocols.

Their design should be based on a differential approach meaning that it should take into consideration the different types of vulnerabilities and different discriminations suffered by the victims (family members and communities). It should incorporate a gender focus, which implies having a proper understanding of the differential impact that the disappearance has on women and men, as well as the differential impact as a consequence of the search processes. This requires a high level of sensitivity to the issue and to the local contexts.

Such an approach should be taken at all steps of the search, until the identification and handover of the disappeared person to their family.

Economic, Legal and Administrative Needs

Families of missing persons endure severe economic and social problems. Measures should be taken to help them cope with the consequences of the disappearance.

Victims have a right to comprehensive reparation which includes the right to monetary compensation for damages caused, medical and psychological care and rehabilitation for any form of physical or mental damage, as well as legal and social rehabilitation. Financial compensation should be provided for any economically assessable damage, as appropriate and proportional to the gravity of the violation and the suffering of the victim and the family resulting from it (physical or mental harm, lost opportunities, material damages and loss of earnings, moral damage, costs required for legal assistance, medical services and psychological and social services).

But it is important to note that financial compensation is only one of many different types of reparations that can be provided to victims. Other types include restoring civil and political rights, erasing unfair criminal convictions, physical rehabilitation, and granting access to land, health care, or education.

Appropriate steps should also be taken with regard to the legal status of the disappeared persons whose fate and that of their relatives have not been clarified. Without having to declare their loved ones dead the family members' situation should be clarified in fields such as social welfare, financial matters, family law and property rights.

Reparation measures need to take into account victims' specific cases, given that what may be an appropriate measure in one case may be inappropriate or even counterproductive in another. Women for example, experience the disappearance in significantly different ways than men. The modalities of reparations should be therefore adequate and proportionate and both gender-sensitive and culturally sensitive.

To be effective and able to address the consequences of the disappearance, the participation of the families in the design and implementation of reparations measures is critical.

Need for Justice

Families of missing persons may need those responsible for the disappearance of their loved ones to be held accountable. Knowing the facts, identifying and prosecuting the people responsible for the disappearance is also a form of reparation for the families.

The right to justice for victims of the disappearances and their relatives is recognized in the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It establishes that the State should take the necessary measures to ensure that enforced disappearance constitutes an offense under its criminal law and make the offense punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account its extreme seriousness.

The status of limitation⁵ is not applicable to the crime of enforced disappearance which constitutes a continuing offense and an ongoing violation of human rights as long as the fate and whereabouts of the victims remain unclarified. Thus, the period of limitations can only begin once the disappearance has ceased, meaning when the fate or whereabouts of the victim have been established.

Need for Acknowledgment, Remembrance and Rituals

One of the main struggles the families of the disappeared encounter is to have the disappearance of their loved ones officially recognized by the authorities and the society they live in, as well having their own suffering acknowledged. They also need to promote and honor the memory of the disappeared person.

Symbolic acts, like public apologies, memorials and commemorations can just be as beneficial, healing, and meaningful as material reparations.

Any memorialization initiatives should be based on consultations with families and communities affected and should honor the dignity of the disappeared person as well as the struggle of their relatives.

It is to be noted that memorials to honor the disappeared persons should not formalize the acceptance of death, but on the contrary to remind the State of its responsibility to unveil the truth about their fate and whereabouts and to seek justice.

- (5) The status of limitations is the law that sets the maximum time after which legal action cannot be enforced, or criminals cannot be prosecuted.

Need to Participate

Families of disappeared persons have spent years looking for their loved ones, gathering information, going to police stations, political and religious leaders, and investigating every single lead. They have the right to participate in any official or civil society-led efforts to search for their disappeared loved ones including supporting the mission of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon. 65.2% of the participants showed interest in helping the work of the commission under some conditions such as providing transparency and the freedom to express their thoughts.

The participation of the persons and communities affected should also be ensured in the design of reparation measures or mechanisms. It should take into account their language, values, customs and right to take part in the policies that concern them.

In this regard, it is crucial to encourage the creation of spaces/platforms/groups where the family members can organize themselves, be empowered, exchange information and views in order to make well informed decisions. Differentiated measures should be adopted to ensure a large participation of families in the search.

The protection and security of the family members should be guaranteed, regardless of the level of involvement that they choose to have in the search. All necessary means should be made available to protect their physical integrity and their dignity, as well as the information obtained throughout the process, from evidence and proof to testimonies and confidential personal information.

Looking at reparation through the transitional justice lens can take many forms, for example, monetary/non-monetary and collective/individual restitution of a status or a right. The needs of the families have shifted between the two points in time when the needs assessments were done. The different needs take precedence at different times depending on the ability to come by basic needs. When those are available, the focus is on restitution, when they are absent, the need for monetary support becomes the priority. For many families, and due to the current situation of the country, the provisions of basic needs have become unmanageable. However, material reparation is only one aspect, the families' need, as well as the Lebanese' public need for symbolic restitution from the injustices of the Lebanese war carry an equal weight. Examples of such symbolic acts can be official apologies, assurances of non-repetition, memorials, memorial ceremonies and so forth.

Chapter 3: Ambiguous Loss: A Psychosocial Timeline of the Experience of Having a Loved One Disappear and Shared Experiences by Family Members.

“Yes, ambiguous loss is traumatic because it is painful, immobilizing, and incomprehensible so that coping is blocked. It is [...] a painful experience far beyond normal human expectations. [...] Because there is no social or religious ritual to deal with such losses, people are stuck alone in a limbo of not knowing, with none of the usual support for grieving and moving forward with their lives.”

(Pauline Boss, 2009)

The experience of having a loved one disappear is a rare and profound event. Most people go through life without ever facing such a tragedy. The sudden and often unexplained absence creates an enduring sense of uncertainty and loss, making it an emotionally isolating experience for those affected. The emotional experience of having a missing person is difficult to comprehend for someone who has not lived it, therefore, it is essential to define and explain in detail what the families experience as the emotions involved are complex and often misunderstood.

This chapter attempts to describe the multifaceted experience of these families, addressing their emotional, psychological, and social struggles from various angles. Understanding these aspects is crucial for professionals to offer the appropriate support and ensure that the families' experiences are acknowledged and validated throughout their long and painful search for answers.

Looking Deeper into Ambiguous Loss

The experience of having a missing person is often mistaken for “chronic grief” or “frozen grief,” which suggests an inability to begin grieving. However, the absence of answers or closure about the missing person’s fate makes it impossible for families to fully acknowledge their loss. This lack of finality creates a unique emotional struggle, preventing the normal grieving process from taking place. It is a state of suspended grief, where the hope of resolution keeps families in a continuous emotional limbo. The construct that best describes this situation of ambiguity is Ambiguous Loss (AL) which is “a loss that remains unclear and without resolution. It has no closure or finality because the loss is ongoing.” (Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

Dr. Pauline Boss is the theorist who identified the experience of Ambiguous Loss (AL) while working with families of US soldiers, missing in action during the 1970s, and she first coined the term in 1984. Boss coined two types of AL:

- A **physical absence and psychological presence**, where the physical absence is compensated for by a psychological presence due to a sudden and unexpected disappearance which can be due to many different reasons such as migration, kidnapping and enforced disappearance.
- A **psychological absence and physical presence**, where the person is psychologically unavailable despite being physically present due to neurological diseases such as dementia or brain injury, stroke, coma or drug addiction.

Our focus in this handbook is on the first type of Ambiguous Loss because it is the one that impacts the families of missing persons.

The next section describes a hypothetical scenario portraying the experiences of having a person go missing. It is the sum of the stories of many relatives of missing persons collected through years of support group sessions reports, with the families of the missing. It is in fact the product of two different therapeutic exercises:

The Jeu de L’oie (Game of the Goose) is a systemic therapy exercise designed to help group members, such as those in a support group or family, create a shared understanding of the experiences related to a traumatic event, like a disappearance. Participants collaborate to define different phases of the disappearance, assigning each phase a title and symbol. The group also collectively titles the anticipated future phase, which can help to foster a sense of unity, validation, and shared reality as they process the event together.

Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) includes an exercise called the “narrative timeline,” similar to the Jeu de L’oie. In this exercise, participants create a timeline marking key events since the disappearance, including obstacles and growth moments. The timeline also incorporates a section for the future, where members reflect on the tools and coping mechanisms, they will use from their past to navigate the ongoing ambiguity and uncertainty about their loved one’s fate. This exercise helps participants process their trauma and strengthens their sense of agency in dealing with the future.

- (6) Boss, P., & Greenberg, J. (1984). Family boundary ambiguity: A new variable in family stress theory. *Family Process*, 23(4), 535–546.

- (7) ACT for the disappeared conducted psychosocial support group sessions for the families to be able to process the ambiguity, these reports were used throughout the document as a resource to give live examples

Each individual's experience of a disappearance is unique, which is why the way the experience is described will vary from person to another. The *vécu*⁸ refers to the personal, lived experience that shapes how each person processes and interprets the event. As a result, the experiences shared in the narrative are not universally fixed but are deeply personal and reflective of individual perspectives. This narrative is an effective tool for illustrating the profound and far-reaching impact of a disappearance on individuals, families, and society. It offers valuable insights into the complexity of the experience and serves as an optional resource in this handbook.

The following story involves a missing person, an adult male (Walid), who is the breadwinner of the family, like the majority of disappeared persons from the Lebanese war. The story will be useful to reflect on the following aspects of disappearance:

1. The impacts of disappearance on the individual, familial and societal levels.
2. A timeline to describe the evolvement of the ambiguous loss.
3. The unique experiences of family members based on their roles within the family, specifically focusing on the perspectives of parents, siblings, and partners.

“Leaving Without a Goodbye”- A Story of Disappearance

A young couple struggled to survive while raising a family of three children in a country that was slowly falling into war. The wife, Nahla, fantasized a lot about the future to cope with her financial and familial struggles, which were exacerbated by the situation of the country. She thought a lot about her three children growing older and her and Walid retiring and moving to the suburbs. The area they lived in was not close to the armed clashes but, still, she and Walid calculated the risks of the trips they made outside their home.

On a night unlike any other, the clashes drew nearer. This was the first time they heard the shooting that close. The couple was unsure if they should stay in or grab their things and run. They decided to leave to their relatives' house in a town nearby. They grabbed their essentials and the whole family got in their car and sped towards safety. As they drew near the border of the town, they were surprised with a sudden roadblock. The armed men asked for the identification document of all the passengers. As soon as they got them, Walid was taken out of the vehicle. Nahla became panic-stricken, but she was reassured that her husband would return home after a routine investigation and was asked to move along. She argued with the men, but they became aggressive and waved their guns inside the car, pointing them towards her children as they yelled at her.

Fearing for her children, Nahla decided to get her kids to safety and come back for her husband, which she had done, but the roadblock was nowhere to be found, and she realized then that she had no way of contacting the armed men, or her husband, or of knowing where he was.

She kept the children at the relatives' house and went with Walid's family to search for him in hospitals, jails, police stations, Red Cross centers, and then finally, the headquarters of the militia, which had control over her area. She spoke to the leader who told her that her husband was most likely a victim

- (8) French expression pointing to the individual experience, an event as it is experienced by the individual

of enforced disappearance and that he would make a few calls to try and find him. She was unable to process or accept that this had happened to her beloved Walid. The family went on for months looking for him in any and all possible places he might have been in; sometimes putting themselves in danger and getting assaulted as they visited detention places. They were victims of fraud as well; people who claimed to know Walid's whereabouts and promised to lead them to him in exchange for big sums of money.

Nahla felt guilty for neglecting her children and burdensome for relying on her relatives for expenses. Soon after, she got a job to sustain her family, while also carrying the burden of child rearing. She lied to her children about what happened to their father. As time passed, the lie she told her children grew more difficult to maintain, as her desire to find her husband intensified. Although his parents and siblings have been supportive, she sometimes felt that they resented her for not doing more on the night he was abducted. It is possible that she's transferring her own feelings onto them because she already felt guilty for not having done more. In fact, the whole family felt this way every time they had something to eat and every time they went to bed; they felt guilty and blamed themselves for not having found him yet. This fueled their efforts into searching for him every day, even though they were burnt out now that months have passed.

Walid's father retreated into a depressive bubble and developed a heart condition and other chronic diseases, while his mother stayed at home at the hope of his return, especially on days he used to come by to visit or have a meal. She even put out a plate for him on those days. Walid's siblings lived in the shadow of their brother and his disappearance, it's all their mother talked about and they are ashamed of the ambivalent emotions, they feel towards him.

The whole family was conflicted; they were unable to accept what has happened to their loved one, but the active search went on for years. It deteriorated many aspects of their lives, including their health, their finances, their family rituals, their ability to enjoy things. Some may think they are depressed, but in reality, they are not. The state they are in is the result of an ongoing event that continues to affect them and cause anxiety.

A few years had passed, with the whole family submerged in the active search. They no longer felt comfortable talking to anyone outside their family about their missing person because they were usually met with a lack of understanding and they felt angered by those who told them to lose hope or wish him to rest in peace. They also felt completely isolated from society for being so detached from the daily life events that other people were experiencing.

Nahla had been working incessantly to raise her children the way she and Walid wanted to, but she was unable to keep up and found herself forced to sacrifice her eldest son's education to ensure that they had a roof over their heads. She, too, harbored ambivalent emotions towards her husband who left her to raise the children alone but she could not accept this anger consciously and instead vented elsewhere.

- (9) having or showing very different feelings (such as love and hate) about someone or something at the same time. Merriam-Webster dictionary

The children had gradually built a vague understanding of what had happened to their father. They learned from experience that talking about him brought tears to their mother's eyes, so they avoided the topic, although they had a lot of questions on their minds. The eldest son had always felt a responsibility to fill his father's shoes, so he grew up to be more mature for his age. He felt a burden to support his mother emotionally and listened to her talk about his father and how difficult life was without him. None of the children ever experienced a normal childhood after the disappearance of their father and many of their developmental needs were not met.

The two younger children who barely had the chance to meet their father, felt as if they weren't supposed to feel sad over his disappearance because they were unsure of what they had lost. They even avoided talking about him to their friends at school.

As time went by, each family member internalized their suffering even more to protect each other from the pain brought on by sharing. They oscillated between hopelessness and hopeful, sometimes several times a day, with every piece of news they heard.

The war has now ended and its actors given amnesty, but the crime of enforced disappearance goes on. The family feels like they are imprisoned, each in their own way with some similarities.

The lives of each relative feel stuck at the time of the disappearance. They aren't able to engage in many facades of life - they are somewhat absent in their own lives. The wife is unable to decide how to identify herself in public; a wife, a widow, or a divorcee... She is stigmatized at times for wanting to go back to a past life which she already feels guilty for wanting.

The war has now been over for several years, the authorities have not been of help. Some missing persons have re-appeared here and there, returning from imprisonment in neighboring countries that took part in the conflicts. Their sudden return brought hope to the family. But after some time, some decided to completely suppress their suffering in an attempt to return to a normal life, while others have engaged themselves in civil society initiatives in the hopes of getting an answer.

Now, almost 40 years after Walid's disappearance, the family struggles with the idea of the death of their missing loved one. They contemplate the idea but blame themselves for doing so. They forget the issue of the disappearance at times but feel guilty whenever they do, and the guilt sends them back into the memories they hold of him and the emotions that go along with it. Walid's father has since passed away, his mother's health is deteriorating quickly. His siblings and wife are the only ones alive with the burden of his memory, the burden of being the last ones able to tell his story or identify him or his remains. His children attempt to compensate for the absence of their father by being present for their children and telling them about their grandfather. Guilt, self-blame, hopelessness, hope, helplessness, anger and anxiety accompany their daily lives."

Phases of Ambiguous Loss

In therapeutic settings, clients are often asked to create a timeline of their experiences, which allows them to organize events sequentially. However, true progression and personal growth tends to be more circular/cyclical in nature than linear. The individual often revisits emotions, repeating past or early experiences, and their associated patterns (thoughts, behaviors, emotions, physical sensations) until they gain insight (awareness) into what they are experiencing. This awareness helps them identify the internal or external factors keeping them “stuck” and recognize those that could facilitate growth.

Similarly, families of missing persons experience common phases linked to the time since the disappearance. While the experiences of these phases are subjective and unique to each individual, there is a noticeable progression in how it unfolds. The sequence of emotional responses and coping mechanisms often follows a trajectory shaped by the passage of time but may also involve revisiting earlier stages as the impact of the disappearance continues to evolve.

The following sequence of phases, as described by many families, is based on reports from experiential exercises conducted during psychosocial support sessions run by mental health professionals and accompaniers¹⁰. It is essential to note that these experiences may vary greatly between individuals, even within the same family, due to various intrinsic and extrinsic factors, especially their perception of the loss and their ability to give meaning to it.

Active Search

“Beirut was divided into East and West, we couldn’t cross from side to side and roam around asking about our missing persons, we had contacts whom we’d ask and they’d tell us that they’re held captive at a certain building but I couldn’t go, I had children to care for ”

(Enaam, sister and wife of the missing, 2021)

Once the family realized their loved one was missing, the uncertainty and intense desire for answers could drive them into a state of panic. Family members devoted all available time, energy, and resources in the hope of finding any clue or information. This tumultuous phase of searching often becomes overwhelming and consuming, as they attempt to comprehend the situation and hold onto hope in the face of the unknown.

The relentless and anxious search for a missing person is driven by fear for their safety, the need for reassurance that they are still alive, and the growing weight of unanswered questions. Families often endure traumatic experiences, such as visiting dangerous places, encountering violence, being exploited, or even facing threats to their own lives. Their search can involve confronting horrific scenes like mass graves or investigating uncertain leads, all while enduring emotional and physical strain without reliable support or information from authorities.

- (10) Person who is tasked to accompany and to be supportive to the families of the missing throughout their experiences, by building trusting lasting relationships

Avoidance of Feelings of Hopelessness and Helplessness

Throughout the cycles of active search, families often experience emotional and physical burnout. The intensity of hopelessness grows over time and each new search heightens the distress. Despite this, returning to the search becomes a coping mechanism for families, helping them avoid the terrifying possibility of permanently losing their loved one. This repeated engagement in the search reflects the ongoing struggle to find closure while clinging to hope, even in the face of emotional exhaustion.

Avoidance also manifests itself in interactions with family members and close community members, where discussing the possibility of permanent loss or confronting the emotional weight of it is often evaded. Families feel compelled to remain 'strong' and avoid emotional breakdowns, holding on to the hope of finding the missing person.

Pivoting From Hope to Hopelessness

"He is alive in our hearts and dead in our minds"

(Brother of the missing, 2017)

Only after many years or participation in psychosocial support can some relatives come to terms with the paradox between their emotions and rational thoughts. Many families hold on to hope, yet they oscillate between hope and despair. For some, accepting that the missing person may have passed away feels akin to the guilt of having caused their death, which adds a heavy burden to their emotional processing and complicates their ability to find peace.

"We would gather in front of the governmental palace, or in Sanayeh gardens, at Mathaf, with no results; they'd tell us that we'll have news tomorrow and the day after and we still haven't gotten any results; but this gave us hope, and the hope still lives on today."

(Wafaa', sister of a missing person, 2021)

"We don't say may he rest in peace, we say "I swear on the absence of my father."

(Zahraa, daughter of a missing person, 2021)

Alertness and Maintaining Routines and Rituals

Alertness is commonly experienced by close family members and is not limited to the active search period. They remain vigilant, constantly scanning news, documentaries, newspapers, or any media for signs of their loved one.

Many mothers and wives describe staying up at night, leaving windows open, or remaining by the landline phone (and this is before cellphone became widely used). They would jump out of their beds every time they heard any noise during the night, and the situation had escalated to the point where they began to feel as though they were imagining things that never were, or they would mistake people in the media or on the street for others.

Often, members of the family will maintain the rituals and routines they had with the missing person, such as dinner times, spring and winter cleaning of the missing person's bedroom to ensure it is ready for their return and clinging to whatever can make them feel the presence of the absent person. These customs differ from the rituals of the extended family, which family members often abandon, such as family gatherings, celebrations, and weddings, for example. They withdraw from family and social events that could bring joy to their hearts or force them to face people with differing views about the fate of the missing person.

Alternation Between Hope and Despair

As families exhaust their search efforts after years of trying, some cling to hope out of guilt, while others experience despair, leading to psychosomatic¹¹ pains, emotional breakdowns, or explosive anger. However, most family members alternate between brief periods of despair and renewed hope. A common conclusion expressed by the families in the Jeu de L'oie was that their missing person was “alive in their heart and dead in their mind”. This paradox captures the constant tension between their emotions and thoughts, symbolizing the ambivalence towards the missing loved one.

Desire to Return to Normal Life

Perhaps the most shameful aspect of the experience of disappearance for the families is the desire to live normal daily lives without being preoccupied with the missing person. Whenever they notice themselves living normally, not having thoughts about the person for a while, they tend to blame themselves harshly and to dive back into reliving the intensity of the absence.

Pressures From Authorities and Family Members

Over the years, as detailed in Chapter one, many attempts were made by the authorities to close the file of the disappeared in Lebanon. Part of these efforts involved pressuring families to declare their missing person as deceased.

Adding to this are the legal, administrative and economic deadlocks the families face as they are required to issue a death certificate, which they are understandably unwilling to do. For instance, institutions may only release a missing person's retirement plan if they are declared deceased and the same applies to bank accounts and the selling of property. This issue often creates conflict within families, as feelings of abandonment and betrayal surface when considering this decision, as though they were themselves ‘killing their missing loved one’.

This pressure was compounded at times by middlemen who are often con-artists and who extort the family for alleged information about the whereabouts or for a promise of returning the missing person. Families were pressured into selling their properties and belongings and those of the missing person; they couldn't bear the thought of not having paid and done all they could for the freedom or fate of their loved one.

Adjustment of the Ambiguity

As the years pass, it is common for families and individual members to adjust their perspectives on the disappearance. This can lead to clashes, particularly in the early years. Each person forms their own thoughts about the ambiguity based on their needs. For example, those who cannot accept the idea of the missing person being deceased may entertain theories of incarceration, while others, unable to cope with the anxiety of not knowing, may settle on a scenario that ‘ends the ambiguity’. In both cases, their fears, needs, and thoughts are in constant conflict.

- (11) of, relating to, involving, or concerned with bodily symptoms caused by mental or emotional disturbance. Definition taken from the Merriam-Webster dictionary

Impact of the Disappearance on the Individual, Familial and Societal Levels

“Ambiguous loss is unclear loss. Ambiguous loss is traumatic loss. Ambiguous loss is a relational disorder. Ambiguous loss is externally caused (e.g., illness, war), not by individual pathology. Ambiguous loss is an uncanny loss—confusing and incomprehensible.”

(Boss, 2009)

Ambiguous loss primarily manifests in the relational domain, where the burden of the disappearance affects the dynamics within the family, between family members, the missing person, and the outside world. This relational impact can create ambiguity in boundaries. Boundaries refer to the psychological, emotional, and physical limits individuals set to safeguard their identity and define relationships with others. The APA defines boundaries as crucial for distinguishing one's identity, needs, and emotions from others, promoting healthy interactions.

When boundaries are unclear or enmeshed, personal identity becomes blurred, leading to confusion about individual needs, values, and autonomy. Conversely, overly rigid boundaries can create emotional distance, preventing meaningful connections. A healthy balance in boundaries allows both individuality and connection.

On the Individual Level

Ambiguous loss is not only manifested in the relational sphere. The loss is also traumatic. As mentioned in the introduction, trauma that is prolonged or repetitive has a long-term impact and can lead to psychological disorders such as complex trauma.

Dealing with the continuous nature of disappearance can lead to a multitude of psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety and trauma symptoms that include guilt, self-blame isolation, and ambivalence to boundary and identity issues as mentioned before.

These symptoms can lead to psychological disorders (which they often do) if they:

- 1- Hinder functioning.
- 2- Last a long time - over one month.
- 3- Are severe.

It is important to note that ambiguous loss, per se, is not a disorder as it is a normal reaction to the continuous event of disappearance.

Is Ambiguous Loss Different from Grief?

“When a loss is complicated by ambiguity, the grief process is frozen” (Boss, 1999), due to a situation which is outside the affected family's control. In fact, it destabilizes their feelings of control so much that it often impedes their ability to predict daily life and to know what to expect. Imagine having to wait for something to happen but you have to wait indefinitely, and you have no indicator as to when the waiting will end. Some people compare it to being stuck in a waiting room for a doctor's appointment with a life-or-death diagnosis awaiting you. The families of missing persons are in the waiting room for the return of their loved one. They are coping to ensure they are able to wait and not to reach closure before finding out the truth of the fate and whereabouts of their loved one(s). The path to closure can only begin with answers on the fate of the missing person.

Guilt and Self-blame.

Relatives of the missing person who were present at the time of the abduction or had unresolved issues with the missing person, often carry a heavy sense of personal responsibility for the disappearance. This burden is accompanied by feelings of guilt and self-blame for not having, in hindsight, prevented the disappearance, stopped it if they were there at the time, or found the missing person up to that point.

These emotions are especially common for relatives of missing persons who were engaged in combat - feeling guilty for not having gone to war in place of the missing person or for raising them as patriotic or with a loyalty to their social group which led to their kidnapping or disappearance.

On the Family Level

When a relationship is suddenly broken off physically, but there is no understanding of why it happened, the unresolved emotions continue to affect those involved, causing significant emotional distress.

In a family, when a member disappears, the rupture not only impacts the ties between the missing person and every member of the family but also the relationships among the remaining family members. In family systems theory, families aim for homeostasis¹² to maintain their established organization and functioning over time. The family system resists change but a functional family will aim to reach a new homeostasis. For example, when one of the children gets married in a family, the remaining members of the family will reestablish dynamics in order to maintain the old homeostasis such as replacing the role of the person who has 'left', both on conscious explicit terms such as redistribution of responsibilities and in implicit terms such as authority, alliances etc. In the case of a disappearance, the family needs to regain homeostasis, however, the change is sudden, unclear and traumatic, making it difficult for the family to establish a new balance.

Immobilization and Boundary Ambiguity

Following the disappearance, and as the members of the family attempt to cope with the ambiguity, they struggle to find meaning to their unclear loss. The narrative they create is often shaped more by each person's internal and external resources to cope and their relationship to the missing person than by the event of the disappearance itself. Therefore, it is normal for family members to have different views on what happened to the missing person and vary in levels of acceptance of the loss, which is understandable especially when there is still a possibility the missing person is alive. This process immobilizes families in their attempt to create a new systemic balance with conflicts arising from differing beliefs on whether the loss is temporary or permanent.

Some families may become stuck or immobilized in this situation, seeking a single definition for the disappearance. The inability to accept the varying views halts the clarification of new family roles and rules, boundaries within each family member, and boundaries in relationships with the family, and often prevents the adaptation of traditions and rituals.

- (12) *a relatively stable state of equilibrium or a tendency toward such a state between the different but interdependent elements or groups of elements of an organism, population, or group. Definition from Merriam Webster dictionary*

“My brother, may he rest in peace, went missing and I owe him so much, I am still searching for him now 40 years later in the hope to reach an answer... His wife and children forgot about him... He went missing so that my family could return safely to me ”

(Selim, brother of a missing person, 2021)

Changes in the Family System: New Roles, New Rules

During the Lebanese war, males of breadwinning age were often the targets of enforced disappearance. Women—particularly wives and mothers—had to take on a double role within the family, and it was also common for children to assume the roles of their disappeared parent or sibling. In some cases, family members took on one or more new roles to maintain family continuity and equilibrium, resembling life before the disappearance. Chronic physical, psychological, and psychosomatic symptoms are common among those bearing these added burdens.

“What is the family structure now? Who is in the family, and who is out? Is the person filling the role of the missing one taking on a symbolic or practical role? What new roles does each family member have to adopt? Who decides these changes, implicitly or explicitly? What new rules have emerged? Who am I to the missing person, and who are they to me? If they return, will they be the same person? Am I the same to them? Would they return to their previous position before their disappearance?”

In addition to the practical roles they took on, family members often assumed implicit and symbolic roles to replace the missing person—such as a child becoming the emotional support for the spouse or serving as a symbolic father or mother for younger siblings.

Specific Experiences of Family Members

The disappearance of a loved one impacts each family member in ways that are common across the family unit, but factors such as their position in the family, age, role before and after the disappearance, and their coping resources affect individual experiences. The following descriptions are drawn from interviews with families of the missing, collected by ACT for the Disappeared companions and others during the handbook’s drafting. These are not universal or definitive but reflect shared experiences among immediate relatives.

Parents

Mothers of the missing are often at the forefront of media attention, especially in the Lebanese context. They are frequently the ones who attend events and advocate for the right to know, while fathers typically take a more reserved role. While some fathers do become more active during the search, they are generally quieter than their wives. In Lebanon, mothers of the missing have played significant roles in both the search for their children and the fight for the right to know, a fact highlighted in the media.

“I often feel hopeful more than hopeless. If it weren’t for the hope, we wouldn’t be still carrying on till this day with meetings and sit ins because we want to know what their fate is. If they’re dead then we accept the will of God, I wouldn’t have this constant feeling of maybe he’ll come in the door every other moment. You always have hope, without hope humans would die. ”

(Mother of a missing person, 2021)

The unclear loss of a child often immobilizes mothers the most, as they become debilitated on every front except for the search for their child's fate. They are often the ones in support groups who hold onto the hope of the missing person's return and are reluctant to redefine hope, which is part of the process of dealing with ambiguity through Pauline Boss's¹³ six therapeutic objectives. Mothers commonly believe their children are imprisoned somewhere. This frozen state is also reflected in their behaviors, such as keeping their child's belongings intact, maintaining their room, or leaving a plate at the dinner table, staying by the phone, and sometimes never leaving their homes for years.

Wives

Having a husband disappear often burdens the wives with new responsibilities. Adding to the weight of searching for the missing person at a time when women were not as empowered as they are today, wives who were mothers had to fill the shoes of the father; financially, emotionally and practically.

*"I worked for 15 years before my children started to support me,
it's been a difficult life for us "*

(Salam, wife of a missing person, 2021)

"Life changed drastically, life is hard, I was young and innocent before my husband disappeared, my children were very young, I would clean houses at first. Then I found a steady job at a newspaper [...] I don't feel like a widow or a divorcee because my husband may come back any day. I was only married for 3 years; I mean I'm still waiting for his return. I still dream about him, about him coming to me. We got married based on love.... "

(Enaam, sister and wife of the missing, 2021)

It is common to read stories (ICTJ, 2015) about women who received blame from their in-laws and feared for the custody of their children due to the discrimination against women in Lebanese Law and therefore did not have their support to care for the remaining family.

"After my husband disappeared, my in-laws weren't good to me, the relationship suffered, and they blamed me for the disappearance. I had my son, and they saw him for the first time when he was two years old, they were cold. I suffered in this life to raise a family, but I thank God that they [my children] turned out to be good people. "

(Enaam, sister and wife of the missing, 2021)

Some wives, however, did receive support from their in-laws in the search and in raising their children. Still, wives often put themselves in risky situations to uncover the fate of their husbands, as they were perceived as less likely to face enforced disappearance than male family members. Their fears were valid, especially when visiting kidnappers, militias, and detention centers¹⁴ (ICTJ, 2015).

Stigma against wives is another significant stressor. For many, it remains a taboo to speak about their needs as women, individuals, or partners. It is also a taboo for them to discuss their personal needs, especially in sectarian or religious contexts, where they may feel pressured to stay in their marriage to avoid losing custody of their children to the father's family.

- (13) *Six key areas form the core of psychological interventions for those experiencing ambiguous loss.*

- (14) *Living with the Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Disappearance on Wives of the Missing in Lebanon.* Page 10- ICTJ - 2015

It is also common for wives to 'protect' their children by not telling them what happened to their father, offering varying stories and attempting to maintain the illusion. This misconception that shielding children from reality ultimately places more burden on the mother, adding to the weight of the disappearance.

Siblings

Siblings are often involved in taking on new roles within the family while remaining in the shadow of the missing person. Guilt of children towards their parents for not being able to 'save' them from the situation of ambiguous loss maintains their roles and incognito position within the family.

"I have six children but for years I only had one, my missing son replaced all of the others, I realized too late that I had emotionally neglected all my other children for years "

(A mother, after 30 years of the disappearance, 2021)

At times the implicit roles siblings take on are of problematic nature, such as being the scapegoat, the hero, or the clown... all of which are roles children can take on in problematic family systems (Polson & Newton, 1984; Wolter, 1995), further complicating and adding to the burden of having a sibling disappear.

Similarly to others in the family, ambivalence is highly prevalent in siblings. Ambivalent emotions are often a struggle to accept, and many tend to compensate for this with excessive emotions of love and admiration of the missing person. In fact, ambivalent emotions emerge only with those who are valuable to us; disappointment, resentment and abandonment can only exist towards those we love, those we expect to understand us and those we need to be around. Siblings resent their missing siblings for the love, care and attention they give them, the desire they have to please them which goes unrecognized, hence the difficulty of accepting the paradox.

Guilt is not only experienced towards the siblings' parents but also towards the missing person, over their continuous absence, over the takeover of the missing person's role in the family, over having their parents beside them... Thus, siblings enter a vicious cycle of guilt becoming reinforced by having to take on more responsibilities within the family, having more ambivalent feelings, and being beside their parents when the missing person is not. Siblings will often overlook their needs over these feelings of guilt.

Children

When one parent disappears, the remaining caregivers, such as the other parent or family members taking on parental roles, determine the narrative that the child will hear. The experience of children varies greatly based on this narrative. Often, the story is tailored to soften the impact for the child. Some are told their missing parent is traveling or working, while others may grow up believing the parent passed away. Therefore, there are no common patterns among children of the missing, as their experiences depend on the narrative they were given and whether they had someone to fulfill the symbolic role of the lost parent.

"To this moment as we speak about my father, I feel choked up, I never experience his absence as death, some of the other children of the missing I met swear on the soul of their fathers, I can't say it, I say I swear on his absence."

(Daughter of a missing person, 2021)

On the Social Level

Families of the missing often struggle to maintain ties with their communities. In the absence of understanding about the disappearance and social rituals, these families frequently become isolated, as their plight goes unacknowledged socially and religiously.

For example, when someone passes away, social and religious rituals provide essential support, but in cases of disappearance, people often hesitate to comfort the families, unsure whether to offer hope or accept the loss. Over time, the subject becomes increasingly awkward, and community members may avoid discussing it, even though it remains the primary concern for these families. This lack of understanding leads to confusion about how to support them, and some may feel pressured to force an acceptance of the disappearance. The absence of societal acknowledgment can leave families feeling isolated, discouraged from publicly advocating for their missing loved ones, and ultimately alone within their family, community, and country.

This chapter has aimed to provide a clear understanding of the complex journey that families of missing persons experience. By outlining the psychosocial timeline and the impact at individual, familial, and societal levels, we have highlighted the profound emotional and relational challenges these families face.

However, it is important to remember that while this chapter attempts to describe the general experience of families, each family has its own unique story, and each family member may respond differently. When listening to families, approach their experiences with an openness to understand their individual perspectives and the diverse ways in which they cope with loss.

Chapter 4: Mental Health and Psychosocial Guidelines and Considerations

Building upon the foundational understanding provided in the preceding chapters – examining the history of disappearances during the Lebanese war, the specific needs of the families of missing persons, and the profound challenges of ambiguous loss – this chapter focuses on actionable approaches to support and work with these families.

The work carried out with families over the years offers valuable lessons, shedding light on their resilience, coping mechanisms, and the critical gaps that require attention. By drawing on these experiences, this chapter seeks to bridge the past with practical trauma-informed guidelines designed to empower professionals and organizations to better serve families navigating the aftermath of ambiguous loss.

Whether you are conducting interviews, facilitating community dialogues, or providing psychological support, the guidelines in this chapter are intended to be versatile and sensitive to the unique cultural and emotional dimensions of the Lebanese context. Grounded in compassion and respect, they emphasize creating safe spaces, fostering trust, and adapting to the diverse needs of families still seeking answers.

Having a missing family member means you have to deal with the shortcomings of authorities and lack of justice and truth which exacerbate the pain of having a missing person.

The approach which will be detailed below is intended to ensure that no harm is done when providing support to families of missing persons. It consists of guidelines to ensure that families are engaged in every step of the process for it to have a reparatory effect for the families involved in any activity.

The needs of families of have missing loved ones vary greatly based on:

- The geographical, historical, political and social aspects surrounding the disappearance.
- The circumstances of the disappearance.
- The different narratives the families commit to.
- Which family member is the decision maker in the family and their relation to the missing person.

For example, in small closely-knit communities, where families know about the locations of mass graves, they may only request exhumation and proper re-burial of remains. On the contrary, in a town with a certain political affiliation, whose interest is to keep the truth hidden, the families may be convinced not to open the graves for fear of political and social repercussions or out of respect for the desires of the political group to whom they belong, which might have declared their missing persons as martyrs long ago during or after the Lebanese war. Another scenario could be that some family members do not want to revisit the past if they have successfully given meaning to the disappearance and have, since then, accepted the loss.

The complex scenarios lead to different needs of different families and contexts regarding the need to know. It is important to keep this in mind while supporting families and always being aware that individual needs do not only lie in exhuming and returning remains and that different individuals might need different things.

For those who are in favor of having remains exhumed, identified and returned to them, they will require first the trust of the party doing this work. The commission's efforts on the file must be transparent through information sharing, which should be trauma informed.

This need to share information is crucial for several reasons:

1. The Lebanese families of missing persons have faced significant challenges dealing with authorities, including commissions aimed at closing their cases and ending advocacy efforts. This history has often led to mistrust or skepticism regarding official initiatives. For the current commission to gain the trust of these families, transparency is critical. This can be achieved through regular and open communication, including meetings, information sessions, and workshops, ensuring families are informed and involved in the process.
2. Following decades without answers, the news of the return or the death of the missing person would likely be very difficult to process or accept. It may also be technically challenging to prove, especially in the absence of physical evidence or reliable documentation, further complicating the emotional and legal resolution of such cases. In some cases, the search process may result in finding the missing person alive, while in others, it may reveal that the individual has passed away. Families will need to be informed of the lengthiness and complexity of the search process, exhumation and identification of the human remains. They need to be regularly informed of updates. and that at times it won't be possible to locate or exhume nor identify any remains. This transparency helps manage expectations and builds trust throughout the process.

In some cases, gravesites may be irreparably damaged, rendering exhumation or identification impossible. Such damage might occur naturally over time or, disturbingly, as a result of deliberate actions. For example, burial sites may be partially or fully excavated and the remains relocated, intentionally mixing them with others to obscure their origins.

Additionally, some remains may remain unidentified due to factors such as fragmentation, burning, or other forms of deterioration. A lack of ante-disappearance data – such as biological reference samples or detailed missing person information from relatives – can further complicate identification efforts.

By openly addressing these challenges with families, practitioners can foster a more trauma-informed and empathetic approach, helping families understand the significant efforts involved and the potential obstacles faced during this deeply sensitive process.

Then, if, and when, there are answers, the families will need to be informed of all the details such as estimated date, place and circumstances of the death. For some, the confirmed identity of the remains will be enough as a proof of death, whereas others might be much more skeptical.

Many factors are at play in defining the decision and readiness of the families to be engaged in the truth-seeking process. One of these factors is their engagement in past activities organized by the different stakeholders such as information sessions, psychosocial support sessions, memorialization activities and advocacy workshops.

Past Stakeholder Initiatives with the Families

Families of missing persons in Lebanon vary greatly in their engagement and openness to engaging in activities related to the truth finding process. The work various organizations supporting the file of missing persons in Lebanon, such as CFKDL, Act for the disappeared, SOLIDE, ICRC, ICTJ, extends beyond legal processes and data collection, but aim to provide holistic support to the families. Their activities include:

- Information-sharing sessions on aspects of the file.
- Psychosocial sessions to process ambiguity.
- Advocacy workshops to mobilize family committees.
- Memorialization activities to create objects symbolizing the missing or their absence.
- Annual International Day of the Disappeared events for awareness.
- Exhibitions of family memorialization projects.
- Advocacy events such as sit-ins, petitions, and marches.

The willingness to participate in the different types of activities and the emotional capacity to advocate or discuss the issue of the disappearance vary greatly between the initial contact and after building rapport with the accompaniers. Over time, as participants process their experiences in group meetings, their capacity to engage with others increases and their emotional responses evolve. Those who eventually participate in psychosocial support sessions and memorialization activities tend to develop a much higher tolerance for ambiguity and therefore are less reactive to the frustration of their ambiguous loss.

Psychosocial Support Sessions and Memorialization Activities

It is essential to define the framework and objectives of the psychosocial support and memorialization sessions, as these activities significantly impacted the families and can serve as valuable resources for stakeholders in the truth-seeking process. Led by the ICRC and ACT from 2015 to 2020, these programs centered on the role of the accompaniers – which are community-selected individuals who guide families through group meetings and personal events. Families were initially visited at home, introduced to the sessions, and invited to informational gatherings, followed by psychological support sessions and memorialization activities. These sessions, initially lasted approximately six months per group, focused on the individual, family, and community impacts of disappearances. Following the initial group cycle, they included outings, social events, and memorialization activities, ultimately leading to exhibitions of the memorialization artworks.

These efforts created a solid base, forming a network of participants that later joined CFKDL regional committees. The objectives of the programs were:

1. To establish rapport with families beyond pragmatic tasks like data collection.
2. To provide updates on progress on the file

3. To mobilize families and create regional committees.
4. To connect these committees with the CFKDL.
5. To maintain relationships through a nationwide network of companions.
6. To support families in coping with ambiguity and processing their experiences.
7. To engage in memorialization activities.

The sessions were designed to target the six therapeutic goals outlined by Pauline Boss (2006), including:

1- Finding Meaning: Each individual must find their own meaning for the experience of ambiguous loss. This helps create a sense of purpose in the present and hope. This meaning can take many forms and for example be spiritual (e.g., “God’s will”) or patriotic (e.g., “he is a martyr”). Throughout the sessions, participants share and inspire one another’s meanings, helping them accept differing interpretations within their families.

2- Tempering mastery: “Do I have control over what happens in my life and to what degree? Is life completely random and outside my control, or is it within my control to a certain degree? How much power over my story do I hold?”

The more rigidly we hold on to the rules of ‘how life is supposed to happen,’ the less accepting we become when facing life’s difficulties. For example, some may believe that bad things only happen to bad people, that abiding by societal laws ensures safety, or that hard work guarantees ‘good’ outcomes – even when those outcomes seem ‘bad.’ These beliefs, though strongly held, are often ungrounded in reality and can cause significant suffering for those who cling unto them. By assessing these meanings, we can help address the paradox between the disappearance and the search for meaning in it.

3- Reconstructing identity: “Who am I to the missing person now 30 or 40 years after their disappearance? Am I still their wife? Are they the person they were? If they return will we relate the same way we did before?”

Believing that things will be back to the way they were is hard to give up on, but it keeps the relative in a state of relational limbo. Building foresight into how things can be different, allows the family to rebuild meaningful relationships despite the absence of the missing person.

4- Normalising ambivalence: “They disappeared and left me behind, I hope they are alive but I wish I could be done with it [ambiguity] [...] He left me with all the responsibilities but I love him.”

Opposing emotions create guilt and confusion for the relatives of the missing person. They feel unable to accept the opposition and this causes them to remain stuck. Normalizing the coexistence of opposing these emotions helps them to let go of anger often brought on by thoughts of guilt and self-blame.

5- Revising attachment: Hanging on to the attachment to the missing person is a terrible burden. Some families haven’t seen their missing person for more than 30 years. They are simultaneously compelled to keep themselves reminded and to let go at once. They forget at times and tend to feel immense guilt for doing so. To forget and let go, the loss has to be clear.

Understanding the role that guilt plays in having to be constantly in memory of the missing person, helps the families let go of this burden, especially when they are able to concretely memorialize the person of the missing person. They learn they don’t need to end their attachment or reach ‘closure’.

6- Discovering hope: The whole process of the 5 previous levels is a prelude to rediscovering hope.

Acknowledging the opposing forces of an ambiguous loss and the pain and absurdity of the situation, allows families to explore ways their life has been and can be meaningful despite the absence of their loved one and absence of closure. The process of working on these 6 levels or objectives is not linear, it is a continuous effort which carries on into memorialization and future activism.

“We started the search in 1976, then with Wadad Halawani and the ICRC and ACT and if it weren’t for COVID-19 we would still be gathering to push for answers.”

(Sister of a missing person, 2021)

Memorialization

“Though we may not be able to build something grand as the state can do, we would like to make something of our own initiative even if the state did not do that. We want future generations to remember the contribution of [our brother] for the sake of the nation. People still remember the contributions of martyrs who lost their lives for the sake of the country even in the distant past.”

(Brother of a missing person, Gorkha, 18 June 2008¹⁵)

“People will know about the missing family because the name will be written on the board or in some other place: we will have peace if we could make it.”

(Wife of a missing person, Bardiya, 9 February 2011)

In the absence of social or religious rituals to preserve the memory of the missing person, families struggle in isolation and receive no acknowledgment or validation for their ongoing plight. They carry the burden of memory, the pain of isolation, and the challenge of communicating their situation to their communities. Social and religious rituals help grieving families by:

- Acknowledging their pain and validating their loss.
- Facilitating the processing of loss on the individual and relational levels.
- Providing emotional support.
- Giving meaning to the loss through the religious and social lenses, supported by the community.

Memorialization plays the role of these rituals, offering families acknowledgment of their ongoing struggle, even decades after the event. Families participate in various memorialization activities, such as the ‘empty chair’ and ‘memory box,’ which produce individual items representing the missing person and their absence. Collective memorials, placed in public spaces, remind everyone of the ongoing absence.

Exhibitions of memorial products allow families to express their pain without words. When they do choose to speak with visitors, it empowers them to start from a place of control.

Families’ readiness to engage in the truth-seeking process and speak out about their cause is likely to be increased by involvement in these activities. However, each family’s needs are unique, so a case-by-case approach is essential. Accompaniment is vital at every step to ensure families have the capacity to cope with the ongoing changes during the truth-seeking process.

- (15) Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialization of the Missing in Nepal, Simon Robins, Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit, University of York, United Kingdom

“For families, remembering the disappeared person is an act of resistance against perpetrators that redeems the humanity of the missing person: to memorialize is to challenge invisibility.”

“Commemorations and acts of tribute give a positive meaning to families’ experience, affirming the value of the missing person and of the family...”

“Memorialization allows families to revise attachment to the missing person by valuing his or her memory while distancing the missing person from their everyday lives...”

(Simon Robbins, 2014)

A Trauma-informed Approach

A trauma-informed approach takes into account the unique needs of people who have experienced traumatic events during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of any project, initiative, or intervention. The goal is to prevent re-traumatization and minimize emotional distress. Often, stakeholders may not be aware of how trauma affects people emotionally and behaviorally. If these reactions are ignored, it can lead to people being unfairly labeled as ‘pathological’ or powerless. Lack of understanding and stigma can cause further harm to both the individuals affected and the stakeholders working with them, ultimately impacting the work in the long run.

Training for stakeholders can help raise awareness on the effects of trauma. Organizations should set clear standards for how to interact with the families of missing persons and management should ensure these standards are followed. Respecting confidentiality and acknowledging individual strengths can help both stakeholders and the families feel more in control.

Adopting a trauma-informed approach is a continuous learning process with some foundational principles, rather than a set of fixed guidelines. The most crucial aspect to ensuring this approach is well implemented is the continuation of the accompaniment activities with the families.

Accompaniment 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 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 of the families (ICRC, 2015).

The relationship built over a long period of time is essential to engage the families in the steps forward, especially on a communal level. The trust and positive regard families hold towards accompaniers in each given community is a major resource to the commission’s work, because participation in group activities is a building block to a trauma-informed approach with the case of the missing.

Trauma-informed care had its origins in the medical treatment of battled-scarred veterans of the Vietnam War in the 1970s¹⁶. In later years, the approach expanded to civilians.

As research on the impact of trauma on the mind and body grew, the approach gained momentum to where it is today.

- (16) <https://www.iowawatch.org/2018/06/15/a-short-history-of-trauma-informed-care/>

How Does this Definition Apply to Families of Missing Persons?

A loss of sense of control is at the core of the problem when dealing with trauma generally and with ambiguity specifically. The absence of a clear understanding of a situation leaves the individual unable to neither reach closure nor effectively cope with the unclear loss. Regaining a sense of control is central to a trauma-informed approach in the 4Cs model (Kimberg, 2017) used here and detailed below. Why is sense control so important when dealing with trauma? Primarily because traumatic events cause us to feel that things are out of our control despite our best efforts - we fight this randomness in life with meaningful pursuits such as a career, a family, friends, achievements... However, how do we cope when faced with an event that seems entirely devoid of meaning?

Re-traumatization can occur in any situation or environment that reminds the individual - symbolically or literally - of the traumatic experience of the individual. Such triggers can evoke a profound sense of powerlessness, lack of control, and vulnerability. The potential for re-traumatization, therefore, resides in the relatives' feelings of loss of sense control regarding the search for the truth about their missing person.

Possible triggers for the families often stem from experiences that regress them back of the enforced disappearance or its consequences, which themselves were traumatic at times as discussed in the introduction of this handbook. The trauma of the families can be described as complex, ubiquitous, and sequential. Triggers could be sensorial (sights, sounds, smells), emotional, narrative, or attitudinal. Examples of triggers (WebMD, 2024) could be:

- **People:** Seeing someone connected to the disappearance or someone with traits resembling the missing person.
- **Thoughts and Emotions:** Experiencing feelings from the time of the disappearance or afterward, such as fear or helplessness.
- **Objects:** Encountering items associated with the missing person or objects that evoke memories of the event.
- **Scents:** Scents can be very triggering, such as the smell of perfume of the missing person or scents linked to the time of disappearance or active search.
- **Places:** Revisiting locations tied to the disappearance, such as where the event occurred, roadblocks, or prisons.
- **Media:** Watching news reports, videos, or images related to the disappearance.
- **Sounds:** Hearing noises, songs, or voices associated with the event, such as gunfire, the voice of the missing person, or music they enjoyed.
- **Tastes:** Experiencing flavors that remind them of the event, such as specific foods or drinks that were present during that time.
- **Situations:** Circumstances that evoke feelings experienced during the disappearance, such as helplessness, loss of control, or fear.
- **Anniversaries:** Significant dates, like the last time the family saw the missing person or events believed to coincide with their disappearance (e.g., specific battles).
- **Words:** Emotionally charged terms, particularly those used when discussing sensitive topics such as remains, or evidence related to the missing person.

The 4C Model

The 4 Cs of the model are Calm, Contain, Care, and Cope. The four principal guidelines to a trauma-informed approach promote a calm, supportive, non-judgmental, and resilience-promoting intervention which gives a sense of control back to the lives of the traumatized families. These principles need to be upheld by the stakeholders in contact with the families and are also the responsibility of everyone working on the file and with the families as they need to be part of every step of the process.

Calm When interacting with families of missing persons, maintaining a calm and composed demeanor is essential.

- **Pay attention to how you are feeling when working with the families.** Engaging with them can be difficult for many reasons, including their chronic frustration and disbelief in what you may have to tell them, the limited or absence of answers you have, the slow pace and progress of the file, the vicarious traumatization from hearing their stories.
- **Learn and understand the stories and traumas of the families,** as well as their effects, to foster a calm, patient approach to their lack of trust in authorities and the accumulation of disappointments from past truth-seeking efforts.
- **Design workshops, informational sessions, and similar activities** in a way that promotes a peaceful environment, with clear, transparent, and straightforward content.
- Cultivate an understanding of how resilience, justice, and equity contribute to building calm and peaceful communities and environments.

Contain When interacting with families of missing persons, professionalism and sensitivity are key.

- **Avoid asking families to repetitively recount the story** of the disappearance without purpose. The collection of information should be organized, intentional, and focused.
- **Maintain positive regard** with families while also setting clear professional boundaries. It's important to balance empathy and support while maintaining a healthy, respectful distance to ensure that interactions remain appropriate and constructive.
- **Stay outside the victim's circle¹⁷**, by maintaining clear and professional boundaries:
 - o Respect your limits: Recognize the boundaries of your ability to help. You are not the savior of the families.
 - o Watch out for self-blame and guilt: If your help is limited, it doesn't mean you are inflicting harm. You are not the perpetrator.
 - o Avoid becoming too emotionally involved: Their story is not yours. Set limits on how much you engage at every given point in time.
- **Earn the trust of the families** by being reliable and providing direct, honest answers
- **Normalize trauma responses** in families by acknowledging them without judgment and maintain a safe distance while demonstrating positive regard and empathy towards the families.
- **Expect the families to react intensely at times.**
- **Train accompaniers** on advanced supportive skills.
- **Practice self-assessment** of needs to improve and adapt to ensure a trauma-informed approach. Look for parts of the stories you may not know and learn as much as possible about the different historical and personal narratives.
- **Form multi-disciplinary and multi-sector partnerships** such as a cross-cutting task force of

- (17) The shift into the role of the victim, savior, or perpetrator within the context of an incident in which justice has not yet been achieved.

mental health, forensic anthropology and legal specialists. The shared knowledge and experiences between this multidisciplinary task force would help them and other stakeholders build a comprehensive understanding of the expectations and risks, essential to form procedures that reduce re-traumatization for the families. When families are well informed on the multifaceted efforts in seeking the truth, it builds a shared reality and proper management of expectations. This would empower them with a feeling of control in the process, therefore reducing the risk of re-traumatization.

Care Fostering a compassionate, supportive environment requires taking care of oneself while caring for others.

- **Practice self-care and self-compassion** while caring for others. Recognize personal limits in empathizing with families.
- **Prioritize a supportive approach** when families disclose trauma-related information over technical or practical goals.
- **Normalize and de-stigmatize trauma symptoms.**
- **Practice cultural and religious humility** by selecting accompaniers from the same community to ensure norms and rituals are respected.
- **Enact policies** within the commission, and the multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral partnerships **that promote self-care, compassion, and equity.**

Cope Supporting families through consistent and compassionate interventions helps them build resilience and cope with the ongoing absence.

- **Emphasize accompaniment interventions** that build resilience such as psychosocial support groups.
- **Ensure accountability** towards families by establishing communication channels through regional family committees and accompaniment groups.
- **Implement accompaniment activities** every step of the way, even during ‘down time’ to prevent isolation and provide ongoing social support.
- **Address families’ needs identified** in assessments as these may exacerbate the weight of the absence.

These guidelines and the foundational principles detailed in the introduction (Safety - Trust - Choice - Collaboration - Empowerment - Respect for Diversity) lay the ground for the trauma-informed approach, which will take a practical shape in the titles below.

How a Trauma-informed Approach Is Applied with Families of Missing Persons

An answer regarding the fate of the missing person is the first step for reconciliation between the families of the missing person and their agonizing ambiguous loss. The truth on the fate of the missing person can also play an essential role in the peace-building process in between communities.

Families will need to be involved in each step of the way. They are not passive agents in this process. Their involvement is key to their trust in the stakeholders involved and the feeling of control over their story. Therefore, as each stakeholder and specialist fulfill their role in the uncovering of the truth, families need to be accompanied and given choices over the process through information sessions and home visits.

“Some people saw the ones who were digging the holes in the ground and putting graves in them here in Beirut in what was a vacant lot but now there is no lot, it’s all covered with buildings, where are they going to dig and recover at this point?!”

(Brother of a missing person, 2021)

Collecting Data and Biological Reference Samples.

A first step of the process is the collection of data on the missing person, the circumstances of disappearance and biological reference samples (containing DNA) and gravesite mapping. In Lebanon, ICRC, primarily, and ACT for the disappeared have been the parties taking on the role of the collection of these samples.

In the identification process, managing family expectations is crucial, especially after long periods of searching. Families may hesitate to participate due to past experiences or personal, political, or communal reasons. Some families may choose not to engage in the collection of Ante-disappearance data (ADD) or DNA samples, and their decision must be respected. While authorities typically collect this data, in Lebanon, the ICRC performs this task and hands over the collected materials to the commission.

Recovering Human Remains.

The fact that some families have already filled out their data and given biological samples does not exclude that they will face facts that they might not be prepared for. As discussed earlier, different meanings are common among the same family. Individuals may present varying abilities to cope with the news they are about to receive. Some will stomach the news of the death or the absence of news more readily than others. Several layers of accompaniment will be needed. Some may require only group and communal accompaniment such as group sessions and symbolic collective activities, while others may require individual accompaniment through home visits or care from mental health specialists.

Accompaniment is a major resource for the families, ensuring they are prepared for the steps ahead, that they are adequately informed, and that they will be supported after the process has reached an end, no matter the result. Therefore, accompaniers need to be trained and familiarized with every step of the search process and all the possible results and reactions of the families. The identification process can also be very difficult for accompaniers, especially those who may have known the families for a long time and have developed an authentic bond with them or have themselves missing persons.

The Process of Recovery of Remains.

Following the localization of the remains through interviews with locals, witnesses, families, and ex-fighters, efforts transition to the mapping of the remains, including the site and all other relevant information. Retrieving the remains is meticulous and often requires a long time to ensure the proper retrieval, transport and storage especially with mass graves. Informing the family of the process is of utmost importance to ensure they fully understand the process and are making a conscious and informed choice.

“Families ask for scientific details. The forensic anthropologist who is doing the analysis should be informing the families of these details. Transparency is key. There shouldn’t be withholding of information so as to protect the families’ feelings, instead there should be

use of scientific terms, and they should be allowed access to reports to understand what methods the specialist used and the results. [...] the involvement of the family in the scientific process is essential so that families can receive specific information and information on lengthiness of the process because they will [...] understand how complicated it is, and they won't feel so frustrated. ”

(Joyce Nassar, forensic anthropologist and Commissioner, 2021)

“We had prepared photos of past exhumations to explain the forensic anthropological aspect of the exhumations so that they (the Families of Missing Persons) understand that the process can take a long time, months.”

(Claudia Rivera, Director of Forensic Sciences at the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala, 2021)

A gradual exposure to the truth by choosing the media (photos and videos) and the words to explain to the families the process is delicate. Choosing the right amount of information is the job of a forensic specialist and a mental health specialist. Essential information includes:

- The method through which the remains will be identified.
- The duration and complexity of the process and the next steps.
- Who will have access to the remains and to the information gathered.
- That recovery does not guarantee identification.
- Where the remains will be stored.
- Whom to contact for more information.
- That only a part of the remains may be recovered and identified.
- What to expect about the condition of the remains.

Showing the professionalism required for the recovery is reassuring for the families. They need to know the level of care, respect and meticulous technicality required. This can be portrayed through media materials such as photos or videos.

Communicating with the Families on the Recovery

Clear and sensitive communication is crucial when interacting with the families during the recovery process to ensure they are well-informed and supported.

- Ensure the use of scientific and/or neutral wording.
- Avoid giving unnecessary information to the families beyond their need for understanding of the process.
- Avoid emotionally loaded words¹⁸ when speaking about the process, the remains, the missing person.
- Avoid specifying the missing person while describing the process. Instead use a neutral phrase such as ‘the individual remains.’
- Attempt to answer all the questions asked by the family.
- Avoid giving specific time frames for the process.
- Never make promises about the time frame or results.

- (18) words and phrases with strong connotations used in order to invoke an emotional response.

- Ensure all close family members are informed.
- Ensure social customs and religious beliefs are respected by choosing accompaniers and specialists who are aware of local culture.
- ALWAYS offer a contact for later enquiries.

The Decision to Have Families Present on Site.

Some families may ask to be present on site during the recovery of remains and this is quite controversial for the obvious triggers which may re-traumatize the individuals. Therefore, it is advised against having them present.

Some handbooks advise to allow families on site except for some who are known to be especially vulnerable, but this differentiation can create unwanted clashes ('Why them and not me?'). The points made for the presence of the families on site are to allow the families to see the recovery with their eyes and help them out of the denial of the news. However, the families should not be forced to accept a reality which they may not be ready to acknowledge; they should do so at their own pace.

Receiving the News of the Death of Their Loved One.

Once the identification has been finalized, the families whose relatives were identified will need to be notified of the news. This is an especially delicate moment for the families. The notification can be done in groups for the families who have been in accompaniment support groups or individually with close relatives for those who haven't been in groups.

Receiving the news in a group allows for social support and the validation of the difficulty of receiving the painful information. This may not be possible for groups from large cities or those whose missing persons disappeared in various circumstances and therefore may not be identified from the same sites.

Delivering the News:

Delivering news about the fate of missing persons requires sensitivity, preparation, and a respectful approach to help families process the information and cope with its impact.

- Give an indicator of the nature of the news at the beginning of the meeting or visit such as: "We are here today to deliver updates on the process which may be heavy or painful."
- Ensure the presence of family members who may be less reactive to the news such as grandchildren or others, who can be supportive to those closest to the missing person.
- Specify the identity of the missing person. Provide all information on the identification and circumstances of death which may ease the concerns of the families, when they are ready to listen. The families need every bit of proof to process the information.
- You may choose to inform family members who are more ready to receive the news ahead of time for them to support the other members later.
- Expect intense emotional reactions such as denial and anger despite the family knowing that there is possibility that the missing person has passed.
- Expect no reactions and tears of relief.
- Allow silence.
- Acknowledge the mixed emotions that may come from having an answer about the fate of the missing person.
- Do not offer reassurance by giving compromises, such as: "at least now you know" or "they are in

a better place.” The meaning that the family needs to give following the news will stem from their story and their needs and beliefs.

- Acknowledge the weight of the news on yourself, it can be a heavy task to carry.
- Ensure the respect of social customs and religious practices.
- The speaker should be someone whom the families trust. It could be a familiar face they have come to know throughout the process.
- Allow time for families to ask questions on the later steps.
- Allow time before handing over remains, preferably after some time, to allow families to process the news.
- Always offer a contact for later enquiries.
- In group settings:
 - o Ensure the presence of a mental health specialist and forensic specialist to answer questions.
 - o Ensure the presence of a religious figure or a community leader in religious communities.
 - o Ensure the presence of the companions of the given group.
 - o Train companions and key persons on supportive communication skills such as validation, showing concern, communicating empathy, allowing and using silence, non-violent communication and de-escalation.
 - o Ensure that all the families have been able to understand the news of the death.
 - o Do not force the news on those who refuse to hear it.

Refusal to Accept the News of the Death of the Missing Person.

It is not uncommon for families to refuse to accept the news, and there are numerous reasons why the families may find it difficult or choose not to accept it. In this case, the person tasked with delivering the news can:

- Re-explain to the family the process and show understanding for their mistrust.
- Offer to put them in contact with other families who were in a similar predicament.

However, the family’s choice to refuse the news should be respected, and the aim of the future support should not be to get them to accept but rather to process and memorialize the absence of the person if they have not done so yet. It can be very difficult for families to accept the death of a loved one, if they are not ready to. For example, they have believed for very long that the missing person disappeared as a hero or a martyr for the sake of his/her patriotism but, the given circumstances contradict their beliefs.

This psychological resistance can be coupled with reasoning that supports it. The families may have information on the circumstances or events which contradict the information given now, or they have been handed only minimal remains. Trying to get the families to accept the news when they are clear about their refusal is fighting their choice and their ability to process and therefore diminishing their resilience.

Receiving the Remains of the Loved One.

No matter how much preparation precedes this moment, the experience can be extremely painful for the families. If there were belongings found on the missing person, they should be shown prior to this moment, preferably when the news is delivered to ease them into this day when the news ‘becomes real’, much like the burial of a loved one or an open casket funeral.

Despite having shown images of remains during the information sessions, the moment of receiving their own can be very difficult especially if there are few remains, or there are signs of what the missing person may have endured prior to their death. The families may express emotions like guilt for feeling relieved after knowing the truth.

Much like previous steps, it is preferable that families gather in their groups for this event for the aforementioned reasons. If this is not possible, even in a closed family setting, the companions should be present as well as the family members or friends who can be a source of support for the core members. The families need to be offered support for proper re-burial of the remains, this could mean a collective event for a group of families or the companions being present to support the families on the day of the reburial.

“When we go to the cemeteries in my hometown, I can’t describe how hard it is for me; this guy is praying for his deceased and the other is burying them... this is life, death is part of it. If this disappearance happened nowadays, maybe they wouldn’t have taken them. There is advocacy now but back then people lived chaotically, no one really cared, and people weren’t as aware as they are now, people were still naive, very, very, naive.”

(Enaam, sister and wife of the missing, 2021)

Accompanying the Families in Adjusting to No Longer Having a Missing Person.

In Lebanon, the families of missing persons have been waiting for three or four decades. They have been forced to return to and maintain a pseudo-normal life, despite the ongoing disappearance. However, now accepting and becoming accustomed to ‘knowing’ reverberates immensely on the lives of close family members. This is especially true for those who have sacrificed their lives or given meaning to their lives in the search of the missing person. They now must face a major change in their identity.

Depressive symptoms or clinical depression may ensue throughout the grieving process. The ‘emptiness’ is created by knowing, by the loss of a cause and the loss of a preoccupation of having a missing person. Families will need to be accompanied especially throughout this phase, as this can have further detrimental effects on their physical and psychological health. Accompaniment group sessions can suggest meaningful activities for the families depending on their demographics and socioeconomic statuses such as handicrafts or a memorial activity or awareness raising activities.

Symbolic Social and Religious Memorials or Rituals.

These rituals are for the families whose missing person has not been found. The length of time that has passed, the change in the locations of battles and massacres, the rebuilding of Beirut post war, and construction in rural areas, means that great challenges lie ahead, and it is likely that many missing persons in those locations won’t be found or have remains that won’t be identifiable. This needs to be clarified from the beginning of the process, that only a fraction of the families will have answers, despite the best efforts of the commission and the specialists. In reviewing numerous contexts, where there have been efforts to uncover the truth of enforced disappearances, the results have varied greatly with regards to the numbers of missing persons and the remains recovered and identified.

Families without news about their missing loved ones may find comfort in symbolic actions or memorials. While some families may come to terms with the missing person’s identity and incorporate it into their own lives, the wider community often sees the missing person as existing in an undefined state—not confirmed as dead, alive, a martyr, or a prisoner.

This ambiguity and enforced disappearance from the minds of the community burdens the families further. The work of Simon Robbins (2014) in *Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialization of the Missing in Nepal* answers the questions on the needs of the families in this impasse.

“Memorialization is a social process that can create meanings and reconstruct identities and, when performed locally, can collectively reconfigure the social space in which survivors live.”

(Robins, 2014, p.)

“Rather than approaching memory after conflict through the trope of trauma, in which truth is something provided by an institutional process, such as a truth commission, that reconciles across the divide of the conflict, victims seek to reconcile themselves to what has happened and to their community, creating positive meanings that can provide hope for the future.”

(Robins, 2014, p.)

Activities that bring comfort to families often help establish a collective identity for the missing person, both for the families themselves and within their communities. Similar to memorialization efforts, families at this stage need opportunities to preserve the memory of the missing person in their community. This shared remembrance allows families a brief relief from constantly holding the memory alone in their conscious minds, creating a balance between honoring their loved one and managing the weight of their ongoing struggle not to forget the missing person.

“They [The families of missing persons] also want memorialization to reshape the social spaces in which they live and in which many of the most extreme impacts of disappearances occur. This leads me to the concept of a therapeutic memorialization, one which serves not the interests of power or a party to the conflict but enhances the well-being of victims.”

This memorial or memorialization product can be the staple in a ritual the families uphold for their beloved missing person, much like the International Day of the Disappeared (30th of August). The families will feel the compassion of others for a day every once in a while, and establish whatever meaning or identity for the missing person that they choose to portray in their product.

“Much work on memorialization in transitional justice processes neglects the power relations that drive collective memory, in the sense of who remembers and how. The intervention described here [in the paper] sought to explicitly enable the agency of victims, engaging with their subjectivity and identity.

Memorialization can boost psychological and emotional resilience and well-being: commemorations and acts of tribute give a positive meaning to families’ experiences, affirming the value of the missing person and of the family in light of the devaluing impact of violations, and reinforce the identity of the families as families of missing persons.”

For the Families Who Do Not Want to Engage in the Recovery of Remains.

Some families choose not to recover the remains of their loved one. The choice of the families’ needs to be respected, and these families still need to feel the control on what to do to symbolically express and commemorate their missing.

Some of these families are those who's missing were elderly at the time of the disappearance or confirmed dead but whose remains were not returned or were murdered on the spot in armed clashes. In some rural towns, the families even know where their missing were, each buried individually or collectively. For these families, the same approach to memorialization detailed above can be beneficial, if they choose to do so. However, they should have the option to re-discuss this matter because they might change their minds when they see the process and other missing persons identified.

“When exhuming, there may be in the same mass grave remains of missing persons whose families do not want their missing person exhumed, but when the other missing persons are identified they say: ‘Ok I want my relative to be identified as well’”

(Claudia Rivera, Forensic Science Director, FAFG, 2021)

Chapter 5: Dealing with the Stress of Working on the Plight of Missing Persons

Caring for the wellbeing of the persons working in stressful and traumatic environments is also part of a trauma-informed approach. Supporting the wellbeing and resilience of providers ensures their health and their capacity to deliver sensitively to the traumatized population of concern. This responsibility lies on the individuals working closely with families and the institutions which engaged them. The caregiver's capacity to deliver with empathy is closely linked to their ability to be compassionate with themselves.

Cumulative Stress Conditions

Working with families of missing persons is emotionally taxing, particularly due to the limited tangible outcomes or measurable progress often associated with these efforts. It is a difficult task with little progress in return of the effort exhausted and the compassion felt when supporting the families. This cumulative stress requires a conscious and intentional effort to manage and not reach burnout or compassion fatigue. Burn-out is defined in International Classification of Diseases-11 (ICD-11) as follows:

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life (International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics, 11th Revision [ICD-11]).

On the other hand, compassion fatigue is defined as “the burnout and stress-related symptoms experienced by caregivers and other helping professionals in reaction to working with traumatized people over an extended period of time” (APA, 2018). The APA provides insights into the symptoms of stress, which are now understood to span multiple dimensions. The five categories of symptoms are as follows:

1. Cognitive Symptoms

- o Persistent worry or anxious thoughts.
- o Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- o Memory challenges or a sense of being overwhelmed.

2. Emotional Symptoms

- o Feelings of irritability, sadness, or frustration.
- o Heightened emotional sensitivity or difficulty regulating mood.
- o Anxiety or depressive symptoms that affect daily functioning.

3. Behavioral Symptoms

- o Avoidance behaviors or procrastination.
- o Disruption in routines, such as changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- o Physical manifestations, like fidgeting, restlessness, or compulsive habits.

4. Physical Symptoms

- o Muscular tension, headaches, or jaw clenching.
- o Gastrointestinal disturbances, such as nausea or upset stomach.
- o Fatigue, rapid heartbeat, or frequent illnesses due to weakened immunity.

5. Social Symptoms

- o Withdrawal from social interactions or difficulty maintaining relationships.
- o Overdependence on others for reassurance or avoiding responsibilities.
- o Changes in the quality of social engagement, such as increased conflicts or isolation.

Recent research emphasizes that stress responses can vary greatly between individuals depending on biological, psychological, and situational factors. The stress experienced while working on cases of trauma can itself lead to secondary trauma. Those who engage closely with trauma survivors often encounter emotional and psychological challenges that alter their worldview and perceptions of others.

The APA (1995) defines vicarious traumatization as “the impact on a therapist of repeated emotionally intimate contact with trauma survivors.” However, this phenomenon extends beyond therapists to other caregiving professionals, such as social workers, nurses, doctors, and any individuals providing direct support to traumatized populations. For example, accompaniers—those who empathetically connect with families—may find themselves profoundly affected by the stories they hear. This can influence their perspectives on the world, their relationships with others, and their self-perception. Recognizing and addressing vicarious trauma is critical to sustaining the well-being of those who work in trauma-informed care.

Self-care Strategies

Self-care is an ongoing commitment to managing stress and enhancing overall well-being. It should not be limited to reactive measures taken only when one nears burnout but, instead, practiced consistently to maintain balance and health.

If you recognize any of the previously mentioned symptoms or challenges in your current state, the following strategies can provide relief. However, if you experience chronic symptoms or find it difficult to manage daily responsibilities at work or in your personal life, it is essential to seek professional support. A licensed clinical psychologist or mental health professional can offer the guidance and treatment needed to regain stability and well-being.

Staff Care for Those Working on the File of Missing Persons

Prioritizing Organizational Support for Staff

Organizations addressing the case of missing persons must prioritize the care of frontline workers who engage with families in the field or handle sensitive materials such as case data and narratives. The principles outlined below are fundamental for stakeholders aiming to maintain trauma-conscious practices by first ensuring the well-being of their staff.

Core Principles of Staff Care

Principle 1: Systematic Commitment to Staff Care

- Recognize staff care as a guiding principle by integrating it as a priority and an essential operational component.
- Establish relevant policies, procedures, and budgets for staff care.
- Enhance organizational capacity to support staff through updated policies, participation in relevant workshops and conferences, and other developmental opportunities.

Principle 2: Guidance and Orientation

- Educate staff about potential field-related stressors, providing resources and services to strengthen their resilience when joining the organization or undertaking new roles.
- Inform new staff about organizational policies regarding staff care and available support services.
- Offer guidance materials on self-care, resilience-building, and stress management.

Principle 3: Continuous Support

- Conduct regular group support sessions tailored to shared work contexts. These can be scheduled monthly, quarterly, or biannually based on staff needs.
- Arrange individual consultations and ensure access to confidential resources for additional support.
- Provide relaxation opportunities and activities to promote staff well-being.
- Create clear communication channels regarding staff care.
- Offer extra support for managers to ensure their well-being and increase their ability to support their teams effectively.
- Implement policies to monitor staff well-being, especially after critical incidents or demanding work periods.
- Develop peer support frameworks, where feasible, by establishing a safe space for open discussion among colleagues facilitated by a qualified trainer.
- Identify roles with a higher risk of exposure to trauma triggers or workload stress and prioritize services for those employees.
- Ensure universal participation in staff care activities, recognizing that stress can affect anyone, even if it is not overtly expressed.

By adopting these principles, organizations can foster a supportive environment that mitigates stress and enhances the capacity of staff to work compassionately and effectively in the challenging context of working on/for the cases of missing persons.

Self-care Tips

- **Recognize your personal stress signals:** Identify how your mind and body uniquely respond to stress, whether it is physical tension, emotional changes, or behavioral shifts.
- **Engage in relaxing activities:** Find soothing practices that calm your mind and lower your heart rate, such as meditation, deep breathing, or gentle physical exercise.
- **Prioritize physical well-being:** Maintain a balanced diet, regular physical activity, and adequate sleep to support your body's resilience to stress.
- **Balance work and life:** Set boundaries to ensure you have time for personal interests and rest outside of work.
- **Set realistic expectations:** Avoid overburdening yourself with unattainable goals or excessive self-criticism.
- **Acknowledge your limits:** Recognize that you cannot solve every problem or support others beyond your capacity.
- **Take breaks:** Schedule regular time off to recharge and avoid burnout.
- **Seek social support:** Connect with trusted colleagues, friends, or family members to share your experiences and receive encouragement.
- **Improve communication skills:** Enhance your ability to provide supportive responses through professional training, which can help you avoid emotional exhaustion.

These strategies not only improve your resilience but also ensure you are better equipped to support others effectively.

Closing Note

This handbook is designed to guide professionals working with Lebanese families of missing persons, offering practical strategies, trauma-informed principles, and a framework for effective accompaniment. Your role is crucial in providing support, fostering resilience, and helping families navigate their complex and painful journeys within the Lebanese context.

As we conclude, it is important to acknowledge that a trauma-sensitive approach is an ongoing learning process. Staying updated on the latest advancements in trauma theory and practice ensures that we are equipped to offer the best possible care to the families. This approach also relies heavily on empathy and humanity, as the commitment to understanding and supporting the families' needs drives all the work. Compassion, transparency, and collaboration are essential in building trust with Lebanese families, respecting their choices, and validating their experiences.

At the same time, it is critical that professionals take care of their own well-being. The emotional demands of this work require mindfulness, self-care, clear professional boundaries and staff care support. By maintaining balance with the adequate support structures in place, you will be better able to support those who need it.

Every step you take in this journey, no matter how small, contributes to justice, healing, and peace-building – not just for the families of missing persons but for the broader Lebanese community. Your dedication and care make a meaningful difference in the lives of those you support, and in the collective progress toward uncovering the truth.

Let this handbook serve as both a resource and a reminder of the profound impact of your work in Lebanon. With continued commitment, empathy, and care, we can help transform pain into empowerment and build pathways toward reconciliation, hope, and healing.

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