

When families are torn apart



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Stress factors and psychosocial needs of family members of missing and separated persons

1. Introduction

Being able to live a family life is a central concern for everyone and is a right guaranteed by various international and national conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹, the European Convention on Human Rights² and the Swiss Federal Constitution³. Despite this, many people are unable to exercise this right, as it is the case for a number of beneficiaries of the Swiss Red Cross.

The Tracing Service and the Humanitarian Visa Advisory Service of the Swiss Red Cross have a longstanding experience and expertise of working with family members of missing persons, as well as separated family members. The Tracing Service of the Swiss Red Cross was founded more than 70 years ago and since then it has observed how ambiguous feelings of hope and

¹ Art. 12, right to privacy, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>,

² Art. 8, Right to respect for private and family life, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680063765>

³ Art. 14, Right to marry and to have a family, <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19995395/index.html>

despair can appear during the time of search. Since its establishment, the Humanitarian Visa Advisory Service witnesses how much the need for family reunification remains a priority for affected people.

Along the years, through our services, the Swiss Red Cross has gathered important and relevant expertise, which gives us a special position to observe and assess the stress factors and psychological needs of the affected people. This article will build on the experiences of the two services mentioned above and refer to the study "*Between hope and despair: Stress factors and psychosocial needs of family members of missing*"⁴ published by the Swiss Red Cross Tracing Service in 2013, as well as to the article "*The SRC aims to engage further in the protection of family unity in the future*"⁵ published by the Humanitarian Visas Advisory Service in 2018.

Putting these two perspectives together has enabled us to identify the stress factors and psychosocial needs of both the family members of missing persons, as well as those of separated family members.

2. Stress factors

Many different stress factors do affect families with missing or separated family members whether this is on the personal, the family or societal level. For each level, a specific factor is presented below.

2.1 family members of missing persons

On a personal level, those affected are confronted with the uncertainty of the fate of their family member. As long as they do not know what has happened to their relatives, there is no objective confirmation of the fate of the missing person. For example, the missing person may be in detention, deceased, or may have started a new family. The various possible fates lead to mental confusion, which often makes people feel that they have to make a choice on the fate of the missing person. This also leads to conflicts in families, because the ideas family members have about the fate of the missing person may vary. Therefore, it is important that families understand that they do not have to decide on the fate of the missing person. The uncertainty and confused feelings are common amongst families of missing persons and therefore support to cope with these ambiguous feelings needs to be made available.

At the family level, apart from the difficulty of how to deal with the situation, conflicts within the family also arise regarding shifting social roles and decision-makings. Often roles in families are strictly assigned and are an important part of the structure and communication in the family. When a person is missing and the family awaits news regarding their whereabouts or their return, it seems like a betrayal to redefine roles. For this reason, affected family systems often remain in the existing roles and thus block an adaptation and further development of their family system.

At the societal level, affected families or individuals often experience isolation. This mainly results from the lack of social rituals, such as commemorative events, in dealing with disappeared persons and their families. In the beginning, when the search is still full of hope, those affected

⁴<https://www.redcross.ch/de/file/11079/download>

⁵ <https://www.redcross.ch/fr/integration-sociale/migration/la-crs-souhaite-sengager-davantage>

are also supported by their environment. However, as time passes by, it is increasingly difficult to keep hope, find closure and move on. It becomes a challenge to articulate the experiences of the family members when there are no means to address and channel their families' need to remember the missing relative. The lack of rituals in memory of the missing, often leads to suppression of the subject, which also prevents those affected from speaking openly about their suffering.

Affected people feel powerless in the face of the situation. They are prevented from moving forward, as if in a state of paralysis, often without any chance to move on or find any closure. Moving on with life would be a betrayal of the person they are looking for. In counselling we often see people who, because of this situation, have great difficulty concentrating, getting involved in integrating into the "new" society and feel constant sadness and sorrow that accompanies them.

In addition to the described stress factors, there is the fact that the affected families are unfortunately often confronted with this difficult situation on a very long-term basis. The search and the uncertainty last for years and are a great burden for the families. This long-term constant strain also leads to physical and psychological stress for many family members.

2.2 Family members of separated persons in the context of migration

The main concern for family members of separated persons is their relative's safety and whereabouts. The majority of our beneficiaries are Syrians who left family members behind in a highly complex conflict situation, while others come from countries affected by conflicts that have lasted for many years, like Eritrea, Afghanistan, or Yemen. In addition, family members who remain in the country are likely to suffer reprisals for the flight of those who have already left the country. Well aware of these dangers, affected people share a great concern for the fate of their family members, which affects them enormously in their daily lives in Switzerland. Their thoughts and social interactions (facilitated by current means of communication and information shared via social networks) focus on the country of origin and the concern for their loved ones, mobilizing a large part of their resources for this purpose and thus leaving them with little resources available to invest in their lives here. Indeed, this concern is a stress factor that can grow to such an extent that it prevents people from anchoring themselves in the reality in which they live. In addition to this individual stress factor, other stress factors related to family and social relations affect our beneficiaries. Separation, like disappearance, has an impact on the social and family roles of individuals. This is particularly evident in the case of separated persons whose family members live in conflict-affected countries, since the family member living in Switzerland is unable to protect them. As a consequence of the conflict and distance, ensuring the family's safety becomes impossible, even though it was often the role of the person who left, to do so.

According to them, it is their responsibility to ensure the safety of their family members, just as it is their responsibility to find a way to reunite with them in Switzerland. Without concrete means to guarantee the safety of their family members in the country of origin or to find a legal avenue for them to come to Switzerland, they find themselves in a deadlock that affects them enormously and leads to feelings of anxiety and despair that are difficult to manage.

Finally, at societal level, the people we meet feel a greater pressure to integrate in Swiss society, such as learning the language and finding a job. Not only are they expected to integrate quickly, but this is very often a legal requirement in order to be able to benefit from family reunification⁶.

Caught between family pressure and the pressure of the host society, affected people are under the influence of several stress factors that affect them and limit their resources, making them unable to fully engage in their lives in Switzerland and therefore in their integration process. This turns into a vicious circle which many of the affected persons clearly suffer from and see no way out.

These stressors obviously have an impact on people's mental and physical health, often characterized by symptoms of depression, such as sleep disorders or nutritional issues.

3. Psychosocial needs

According to Swiss Red Cross experience in providing support in the search for missing persons and family reunification, the needs of family members of separated as well as missing persons are often similar and shared. These needs include personalised contact with the Red Cross Services, the provision of information, access to affordable and reliable communication means and recognition.

One of the main needs identified is having regular contact with the Red Cross. It is important to have a space where affected persons can talk about the missing or separated family members and the impact of this situation on their daily lives. Especially as it is taboo to talk about the missing person within society as well as within the family. Furthermore, affected persons also expressed the need to talk to other affected persons who experience or have experienced something similar. Some also raised the need to hear about positive examples so that they retain hope.

The need for obtaining information, in order to develop their own options for action is also a main need identified in our services. The information affected persons need to get is about search options to find their family members or the existing legal framework on family reunification or other legal avenues. Providing this information allows them to better understand their situation and also empowers them, as they are able to make informed decisions.

For families living apart, regular communication is an important constant. Although new digital means have simplified communication between separated family members, not all those affected have the knowledge how to gain access to affordable and reliable communication means. A need for support in this area was therefore also identified.

Affected people often express a strong need for recognition. This entails that their situation is recognized as being difficult and a source of suffering, even if no concrete solution can be offered. An example to illustrate this need for recognition is the Memorial Day for persons with missing family members that the Swiss Red Cross organised in 2018. The outcome of this event was very positive; however, it was highlighted that the families concerned have no place to remember the missing person. In this regard, the fact that the Swiss Red Cross is committed to advocating for their rights and involving them in this process represents a great support for the affected people.

⁶ In Switzerland, persons granted subsidiary protection must wait 3 years before being able to apply for family reunification and are subject to financial and housing requirements.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The Swiss Red Cross experience shows that family members of missing and separated persons often face critical mental health and psychosocial difficulties when their loved ones are not present. This often leads to difficulties to resume normal lives and integrate in their new country/host country. Against this background, the Swiss Red Cross has developed activities aiming to provide support to families in coping with their distressingly ambiguous experiences and reducing isolation within families and communities.

This experience has also allowed the Swiss Red Cross to identify the following recommendations that the RCRC Movement and pertinent authorities should consider in enhancing the well-being of family members of missing and separated persons and facilitate family reunification.

- **Understand the specialty and the impact of the situations** helps to better accompany the families. This supportive attitude is very important for the helper to have and means recognizing the high impact on the affected person's life and not being afraid of talking about it. Not talking about the situation anymore would contribute to the isolation of the concerned family member.
- **Participate in a re-definition of roles in the family** if possible in a process where the whole family system is included. Support people to break free from the paralysed situation, encourage them to take their part as parent (or other family role) even if the other parent (or any other family member) is missing or if they need to do so from a distance.
- **Empower people to retrieve an active part in society** through talks, activities and engagement. Getting something to do gives sense back to one's life and can contribute to rebuilding the often troubled self-esteem. Being distracted through work or social activities also helps to break the vicious circle of negative thoughts. Therefore, all types of contact with our volunteers and staff can contribute to improving the personal situation of affected people.
- **Take transnational relationships and resources into account in a support based on a systemic perspective.** As mentioned above, some of the affected persons regularly use different means of digital communication to maintain contact with family members from whom they are separated. These contacts are very rarely taken into account in support activities, although most of our services aim to work with a systemic perspective. These family relationships, although experienced transnationally, represent real resources for people, who still seem to be under-exploited in the support work. Consideration could be given to this subject, with a view to mobilizing these resources and taking advantage of current communication technologies. A family member who lives in another country could be included in an interview we are having with an affected person. This could be very helpful in order to ensure that all family members have a common understanding of the situation and the options available. For example, in relation to the legal framework, when informing about a negative decision after a family reunification request, family members abroad can be involved and get the same information from a "neutral" body. By doing so, some of the stress factors mentioned above might be reduced, such as those related to the high expectations of family members who have remained abroad or those related to the redefinition of roles within the family system.

- **Analyse the needs of affected people and monitor trends in international migration movements and politics in the field of family reunification and missing persons. Use the results of these analyses for evidence-based lobbying and advocacy work.** This must be made in addition to the counselling and psychosocial support that our services provide and build on the expertise and data these services provide. These continuous analyses are essential foundations for evidence-based lobbying and advocacy work. As front-line professionals, we have an important role to play in lobbying and advocacy work to improve the situation and rights of affected people. To do so, we must use our strength, which is to be in direct contact with affected people and be informed about the real challenges they face, while being part of a broad international movement capable of delivering strong messages to our authorities. The involvement of affected people in advocacy activities should also be considered, as they should be called upon more often to participate and have a say on the topic.

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