



LARRY'S STORY

Reconnecting an adult caller to Missing People's helpline.

Larry had been reported missing to the police after leaving the home he shared with his wife and adult son. He had been experiencing some financial problems in the months prior to his disappearance. He appeared to have left of his own accord, and had taken his passport, wallet, keys and some other belongings.

Missing People created a publicity appeal and circulated this online and via posters in relevant areas. Missing People provided family support to a number of members of Larry's family, including the use of an online forum for families to talk and support one another, the offer of telephone counselling, 24/7 support by phone, a suite of online guidance leaflets and the support of a dedicated Family Support Worker.

After some months of being out of contact, Larry contacted Missing People's 24-hour services, first by email and subsequently by phone. Larry did not mention why he had decided to get in touch, or how he had found out about the Message Home service. Larry was initially very concerned about confidentiality, and asked many questions about whether he could be traced by his phone call.

Missing People reassured him that his call would not be traced, and that the charity would not tell anyone he had called without his permission, unless he said something that caused concern for his or someone else's safety.

Once Larry had been reassured, he asked to pass a message to his wife and son. Missing People asked some questions to verify his identity then discussed the wording of the message with Larry, to ensure that it was not negative. Missing People asked Larry to call back in an hour's time if he wished to know that his message had been passed successfully. Missing People then phoned Larry's wife, and asked her whether she was willing to receive Larry's message. Larry's wife was keen to receive the message, which was that Larry was safe and well, and would be in touch soon. Larry's wife also asked Missing People to pass a message back to Larry, that everyone just wanted to know that he was OK, and he could get in touch any time.

Over the coming weeks, Missing People was able to pass several messages from Larry to various family members, and messages from them back to Larry. Larry did not choose to return home immediately, but informed Missing People that he had resumed direct contact with various members of his family. Missing People has not been informed what happened after this.

MISSING PEOPLE AND REACHING OUT FOR HELP

This case study explores what happens when missing adults choose to reach out to their family via Missing People’s 24/7 services.

People lose touch with their families in a number of different ways. Biehal et al (2003) illustrated this conceptually with the ‘missing continuum’ that mapped the ways in which people go missing:

Figure 1: The missing continuum



Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003: 3.

Although the concept of intentionality, as related to missing incidents, is problematic, many missing adults will have left deliberately (Holmes, 2015, forthcoming). Adults have the right to go missing, provided they are not subject to any legal orders that require them to be present at a given location (for example, being detained subject to a section

of the Mental Health Act (1983)). A 2003 research study into the characteristics of missing incidents investigated by the charity found that nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of missing adults in the sample had left deliberately. The most common reason for leaving deliberately was a breakdown in relationships (Biehal et al, 2003: 14-15).

MISSING PEOPLE, CONTACT WITH MISSING PEOPLE

- In 2011, Missing People had contact with 1,622 missing people by phone, text and email (including 421 outgoing TextSafe messages)
- Age was known in 32% of all 1,622 contacts, of which 32% were adults
- Age was more likely to be known for phone contacts. Age was known in 97% of 470 phone conversations, of which 33% (n=145) were known to be adults.
- Age was known in 13% of 370 email conversations, of which 33% (n=16) were known to be adults.

REACHING OUT AND RECONNECTION

“We try and keep it as neutral as possible. [...] The reconnection is supposed to be positive. We are looking to reconnect people in a positive way. [...] We like to know the background and one of our questions is ‘Why are you now wishing to get back in contact?’

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

Missing adults can contact the charity by phoning or texting 116 000, or by email to 116000@missingpeople.org.uk. As well as providing support and advice to missing adults, the charity is able to reconnect missing people directly with family, a

carer or other support services such as police, social services and emergency housing teams. The charity can facilitate either a three way conference call by phone, or can pass a message from a missing adult to their family. Messages can be passed in both directions without the missing adult needing to reveal their contact details; they can simply contact the charity to collect messages.

Returning of their own accord

“If nobody knows where they are, you can’t communicate with that person to say ‘Look, it’s alright to come back.’”

(Sibling of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

Missing People publicised 408 missing adults in 2011. Of these 408 adults, 69 were still missing at the time of analysis and 339 cases had been closed. Of these 339 closed cases, 47 had returned of their own accord. This represents 25 per cent of cases where the outcome was known (n=191), and 14 per cent of all closed cases (n=339).

Relatively little is known about missing adults who return of their own accord. Biehal et al (2003) found that some missing adults were prompted to return by being contacted by a family member, and some were prompted to renew contact when they received a tracing letter from the charity. For some missing adults, “the key factors that prompted their return were reassurance that they would be accepted back and the fact that both parties were keen to rebuild relationships” (Biehal et al, 42-43).

More recently, a study of returned missing adults (all of whom were searched for by police) found that decisions about the reconnection, including the timing and method, were prompted by “an aspiration to end the constant motion/emotion of the journey. [...] The desire to re-establish everyday norms and routines helped to draw a journey to a close” (Stevenson et al, 2013: 81). Many of the adults in the study had approached ‘sympathetic agents’, such as friends, who encouraged them to reconnect (ibid.).

Help seeking behaviour whilst missing

Recent research found that it was rare for missing adults to seek formal help from any agency relating to their missing status. Some of the sample of 45 returned adults (24 per cent) had sought medical help while missing, but many were turned away without being seen or receiving treatment, and their missing status was not questioned or discussed (Stevenson et al, 2013: 75). The majority of missing adults use informal networks of friends or family members for support rather than seeking help from organisations (Stevenson et al, 2013).

This study examined missing people who were publicised by the charity, and searched for by the police, during 2011. Of these 690 people 66 per cent were found alive⁶, of whom 22 per cent had returned of their own accord, and a further eight people (2 per cent) had been in contact with Missing People before returning.

In 2011, 335 (21 per cent) of the 1,622 analysed contacts to Missing People’s 116 000 channels resulted in a reconnection to family, a carer or a third party. Of the 335 reconnected contacts, 107 (32 per cent) were known to be from adults. Younger adults were reconnected more often than older adults, and more adults were reconnected to family members than to third-party organisations.

Adults who contact Missing People’s 116 000 service do so for a variety of reasons, not all of which relate specifically to being missing. Of the adults who contacted the charity in 2011, only a third (32 per cent) were away at the time (rather than thinking about leaving, or post-return). The most common reason why adults contacted the helpline was concerns around housing, homelessness or having nowhere to stay (24 per cent of contacts).

None of the 45 missing adults in the Geographies of Missing People study had accessed helplines whilst away and, indeed, few had heard of the Missing People services. None of those who had heard of Missing People had made contact, reporting either that they did not feel that the service would be impartial, that they did not feel they could truthfully pass a ‘safe and well’ message, or that they did not identify with a stereotype of a missing person, and therefore did not feel the service was appropriate for them (Stevenson et al, 2013: 76). This has implications for the marketing of relevant services to particular target groups.

Responding to being sought

“They may contact us because they have got a TextSafe. Or they have seen a poster of themselves and they are saying ‘You need to take this poster down’.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

In order to safeguard missing adults, by making them aware of the charity’s services, Missing People offers the TextSafe service to police forces whereby they can request a text message to be sent by the charity to a missing person. This service informs missing people that they have been reported missing, and that the charity is there to help them confidentially.

⁶ A further ten per cent of the 690 people were found to have died, and the remainder either remained missing after a year, or outcome information was not available.

⁷ This count only includes responses sent from the recipient mobile phone. The charity is not able to trace responses from different mobile phones, landlines or other methods such as email.

The outgoing message gives the missing person the charity's email address, text message number and telephone number as well as sharing a link to guidance on the website.

In 2011, the reference period for this study, 517 TextSafe messages were sent to 421 people. Of these, 198 TextSafe messages were sent to missing adults, and these messages had a 5 per cent response rate⁷. Currently these messages are only available to the police, but this will be extended to social services in late 2014. Similarly, TextSafe messages are only currently sent to missing people who are deemed to be at high or medium risk; this could be extended to include people assessed to be at low risk, or 'absent' rather than missing.

Reconnection of adults more commonly took place after a telephone contact than a text or email contact. Fewer than one in ten (8 per cent) of adult reconnections took place via email, compared to more than 9 in 10 (92 per cent) by telephone. Some telephone reconnections started with text or email messages being exchanged, before the missing adult made a telephone call to go through with a reconnection. This may be because callers wish to establish trust in the charity and its procedures before calling (for example, to find out whether calls are traced). This may also be because text or email

messages are the caller's preferred channel, but they come to learn that reconnection may be done quicker and in more ways by telephone. Call takers recognise that this may lead to some tension, and best practice suggests that call takers should not encourage people to change their mode of contact unless it is unavoidable.

"Reconnecting people via text or email] is a harder, longer process. We still do some reconnections. We have passed messages. We have loads of text cases where we end up going through to social services. But it is back and forth, back and forth, and then eventually speaking to the person. It's a harder process."

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

"If they've chosen to contact us using a particular medium, you don't want to sort of say 'Could you please call us', because obviously they've decided they don't want to do that, maybe that's why they're texting or emailing."

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

PRACTICE EXAMPLE: AFTER MISSING SUPPORT - WELSH PILOT

Missing People has been awarded funding over three years from the Big Lottery Fund Wales Innovation programme for a new project to support reconnected people and their families after a missing incident. The project has been funded for three years in Wales, and will involve an in-depth evaluation of this new service. The project aims to:

- Develop effective partnerships with partner organisations in Wales
- Provide support to formerly missing children and adults, and their families
- To develop an evidence-led service in consultation with families of missing people

The project has been developed in response to needs identified by the charity's Services team, and to responses to the charity's Family Feedback Survey, which showed that nearly half of respondents would have appreciated support after their missing relative was found.

Responses from family members can vary

Previous research has recognised that families of missing people experience a wide range of different emotions following a disappearance (Holmes, 2008). For some families, reconnection with the missing person is not welcomed, but the missing adult may not be able to predict the response their

contact would prompt. For some missing people, reconnecting with family can be daunting, especially if they had parted on bad terms. Missing People provide a Message Home service for missing adults, brokering contact with family members and thus providing a protective buffer should the reaction be negative.

In practice, families do not always respond positively to messages from missing adults. In this instance Missing People is able to offer and provide support to both the family member and the missing adult. This role of contact broker is protective to both parties, and allows feelings to be explored in a safe way before contact is resumed.

“Because you do not know what that other person is going to be like. With missing there are always two sides to every story. [...] With messages I always worry that the person on the end of the phone is going to go ‘Well, actually, I don’t want this message and you can tell XYZ to, erm, whatever’.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

“How will they react? We are obviously taking it on face value. They may have told us that the relationship with the family is OK and they will be happy to hear from them. That is not always the case. So from past experiences I am always a bit, ‘How will it turn out? How is it going to feel? Is it going to be emotional? Are people going to be cross?’ And you never know. [...] I had one call once where someone hung up on me. That was really difficult.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

“At least if we are able to open up the lines of communication then we are reconnecting, even if there is no direct contact necessarily between, you know, the two parties.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

Reconnection can take time

Reconnection is not a process that always happens instantly. Some reconnections take place over the course of several messages, which can take hours, days, weeks or longer. Analysis for this study of 81 instances when a caller was reconnected via three-way call or message passing, found that 10 per cent of callers were in contact with the charity for more than a month.

In some cases, missing people first reconnect by passing a message to family to say that they are safe and well but do not wish to resume contact. On some occasions these missing adults later decide to resume contact.

“She refused to have anything to do with us for a while. I’m not sure how we got back into contact, exactly what triggered it off, ‘cause I think I’d been trying and sending her emails, keeping the lines of communication open. Eventually, we did get back into contact.”

(Parent of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

When a missing person has passed a message home but has not resumed contact, Missing People retains contact details for the family, so that if the missing adult later wishes to resume contact after all, that option remains open to them.

“She has got back in contact with us and said ‘Look, I appreciate what you do. It is not for me right now.’ And there is always that chance, you know, with a case like that there is always that chance that she might well call back. You know she might change her mind. It is always out there for her and she knows she has a way back if she chooses.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

Reconnection can be both stressful and liberating

When someone is missing, especially when the police are investigating, it is possible that secrets will be uncovered. For example, it may be that in the run-up to the missing incident the missing person had concealed certain things about their behaviour, their health or their relationships. For the missing person, fear of people’s reactions to these secrets being revealed may make reconnection all the more daunting. After reconnection, this information may cause difficulties between family members, but the openness may also be liberating for the returned person and could result in the missing person being able to address issues with their family’s support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 12.** Missing People's services provide a range of options for supporting missing adults to reconnect, including acting as a contact broker. Missing People and partner organisations must therefore explore opportunities to reach out to more missing adults, and to direct them to Missing People's 24/7 services via 116 000. Key opportunities for marketing include support services that missing adults might access, be they targeted drop-in centres, health or social services, or public spaces where missing adults are likely to be (such as transport hubs, supermarkets; Stevenson et al, 2013).
- 13.** In order to reach out to help more missing adults reconnect, Missing People should consider the possible use of TextSafe (or an email equivalent) for low risk missing adults. This approach might be offered in support of low risk police cases that are not ordinarily referred to the charity, in order to reach out to adults who may have chosen to leave but may also welcome advice and support.
- 14.** Police forces should consider signposting returned missing adults to 116 000 if they do not wish to have direct contact with their family, because the charity can then broker contact by passing messages back and forth. Other service providers (such as homelessness services, refuges, etc.) should be encouraged to direct clients to Missing People's expert, independent services as a contact broker, when clients consider reconnecting with family members. Service providers may also consider becoming Missing People Support Partners, thereby receiving missing person appeals and guidance on supporting missing individuals.