

# Case Management and Social Support System for Families in Distress: A Social Work Response

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## ABSTRACT

*History is witness to the fact that warring factions in any armed conflict often commit several human rights violations like murder, rape, torture etc., and the act of disappearance of person is one among them. While the persons who are subjected to disappearance are the primary victims, the families they leave behind are the secondary victims. The situation makes families of the disappeared person suffer great anguish when their loved ones go disappeared. The phenomenon produces anguish, fear and unspeakable sorrow for thousands of families. Appreciating the importance of social work professionals in helping families deal effective with their life situations the present paper aims to provide a case for social work interventional techniques of Social Support System (SSS) and Case Management to modify and make the social environment conducive for the families to live a normal life.*

**Keywords:** Families, Disappearance, Case Management, Social Support System

## INTRODUCTION

Societies world over have been witness to violent conflicts. Violent conflict anywhere is associated with human loss. The warring factions often resort to severe human rights violations like murder, rape, torture, and disappearance of persons. The issue of disappearance of persons is relevant in a large number of contexts, with almost every contemporary conflict leaving significant numbers of families with no news of their loved ones, families live in the state of ambiguity (Butalia, 2001). The phenomenon produces anguish, fear, and unspeakable sorrow for

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thousands of families. While the disappeared themselves are the direct victims, the families they leave behind are also victims. The impact on the disappeared person's families cannot be generalised; assumingly it will depend upon their family circumstances, education, and economic situations. Very often the families of the disappeared persons are unable to overcome their pain and rebuild their lives again. It is a fact that the only conceivable proof of death is the body itself, the families continuously bears the trauma of not performing the death rituals without this proof. Not knowing the whereabouts of a loved one creates what has been described as tormenting uncertainty (Humanist Committee on Human Rights & Linking Solidarity, 2003).

There are many reported symptoms consistent with the impact of trauma. Chronic physical symptoms that are attributed to the long-term effect of the disappearance are also widely reported, presumably somatic. These factors indicate that family members may be subject to various depressive and anxiety disorders (Robins, 2009). This leads tens of thousands of family's world over face the agony of uncertainty for years. This uncertainty prevents them from achieving closure until they find an answer. This traumatising event, being of a chronic nature has emotional, psychological, economic and social consequences and is often accentuated by the psychological, economic, social, and legal problems (Blaauw & Lahteenmaki, 2002).

The disappearance on one hand has affected the lives of the families thereby making their survival extremely difficult and on the other hand has severely affects the social fabric of the society producing more orphans, destitute, and women often termed as "half widows".

The problem takes a serious turn if the disappeared person was an earning member of the family. Challenge of feeding their families, with no economically active member, they are left with no alternative. Families articulate their economic needs in terms of what they cannot afford, and for most this prioritizes food, education and health care.

The families desperately search for information until they know for sure whether their relatives are alive or dead (Butalia, 2001). The impact on the families of disappeared persons has been a matter of concern for the social work practitioners. In order to develop interventions for them requires one to explore the impact through different ways, because of the complexity of the issue. Therefore, the issue of going disappeared raises important issues for social work and the social services in particular (Pyane, 1993).

## **THE SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE**

The social work practitioners are expected to see a problem, even a difficult problem, and try to help people solve it. The practitioners must prepare themselves to help people with individualised problems on one hand and very broad problems that affect the whole organisation and communities on the other (Krist-Ashman, & Hull, 1998). It is clear that the disappearance of a family member has a multi-dimensional impact on the family. Therefore, any social work intervention which is proposed to be done with the families should be able to take into account the various systems within the social environment of the families which have a direct or indirect bearing on the coping ability of the families of disappeared persons.

Acknowledging the diverse and varied nature of problems of the families of disappeared persons and the wide variety of practice settings and types of clients it is not possible to identify a single social work practice framework that is appropriate to the needs of families. It is important that whatever the practice framework, it should be based on social work values and generate success (Sheafor, Horejsi & Horejsi, 1994, pp: 47-48). The intervention should take account of various policies, programmes, and plans which have a direct or in direct bearing on the coping capacities of the families. As far as this objective is concerned the Social Support System and Case Management as intervention techniques of social work practice can be effective if employed properly.

## **SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM (SSS)**

Social support is exceptionally important for maintaining good physical and mental health. Overall it appears that positive social support of high quality can enhance resilience to stress, help protect against developing trauma related psychopathology, decrease the functional consequence of trauma induced disorders such as Post Traumatic stress disorder, and reduce medical morbidity and mortality (Southwick, Vithylingham, & Charney, 2005). Furthermore, environment in which an individual lives has a great bearing on the social functioning and well-being of the individual. When a thorough look is made on the impact of disappearance on the families of disappeared persons it is found that social environment has often been perceived as one of the greatest influence on their well-being by affecting their social functioning and social roles. In determining the level of social functioning of the client system, the establishment

of the Social Support System (SSS) can play a major role. It has been established that there are some vital needs that can be met only through the environment. Mobilising these SSSs has to be given a special emphasis in order to provide the remedies to the varied problems of client system.

As it is established that the families are having a high level of psychological impact and are constantly in a state of stress (Amin, 2012), it is maintained that stress because of certain problem can lead persons and families to serious breakdown of functioning. Moreover, the severity of stress may result in temporary or permanent disruption of major source of social support (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993). It has been established that loss of important social support through exit events like death, or leaving homes can initiate the suicidal attempts in the client system. The support systems (SSSs) tend to buffer the impact of these exit events (Slater & Depue, 1981). It is thus very apparent that presence of SSSs tends to reduce the impact of stressful situations and facilitates the successful adaptation. Thus establishment of SSSs represents a vital and very significant resource that practitioners should consider as they assess problem of the persons living in the stressful situations. The intervention by social worker should initiate with the process of identifying and taping the dormant SSSs and mobilise new SSSs in assisting clients to cope with life stress.

Before considering the SSSs for the client system it is very important to clarify the vital needs of the client system that are met through SSSs in this direction on the basis of list developed by Weiss (1974) and Hepworth and Larsen (1993). The following vital needs are proposed that are met through SSSs:

- (i) Attachment is a very essential requirement as families usually feel isolated and insecure about their future. Close affectionate relationships and intra and inter family bonds can help in develop a sense of security and belonging.
- (ii) Social integration makes families feel being part of the social system, thereby helping them to cope with social isolation. The importance of integration of families with the other ones having the same problems and issues plays a vital role in mainstreaming of such families. This can be furthered by establishment of network of families that share interests and values. The membership in the network is vital for the families.
- (iii) Physical care is another aspect that can addressed, as this study shows that a large number of families are having multiple health problems and many of them are not in a position to take care of their illness due to incapacity, or severe disability.

- (iv) Validation of personal worth (which promotes self-esteem) is also a very important aspect that can be taken care of by the SSSs. This can be provided by families and colleagues.
- (v) A sense of reliable alliance: The families have an assurance that they have, like them, other families in an alliance which is reliable and trustworthy.
- (vi) The families have financial, educational and childcare needs. These can also be addressed by SSSs involving networking with various social service delivery organisations and state as well. The families can be provided with guidance, childcare, financial aid, and other aid in coping with difficulties that arise.

One of the very important issues that has come up in this studies is the psychological impact on the families. Such families lack coping skill essential to maintain themselves in the community, thus requiring the social work practitioners to mobilise resources including the SSSs. In such situations social work practitioners can serve this client system as case managers (Harris & Bergman, 1987).

## CASE MANAGEMENT

Social work is a profession of varied dimensions. Social workers are uniquely qualified to serve as case managers by reason of their knowledge of community resources, their skill in communication, advocacy and the purpose and objectives of the profession. As serving as case managers thus is consonant with the spirit of social work (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993, p.489). Case management is a technique employed by social workers to deliver services to individuals and their families with complex, multiple problems or disabilities (Skidmore & Thackrey, 2000). The National Association of Social Workers (1992) has defined Case Management as a method of providing services whereby a professional social worker assesses the needs of the client and his/ her family, when appropriate, and arranges, coordinates, monitors, evaluates, and advocates for a package of multiple services to meet the specific clients complex needs. Given the description of case management, it is clear that the families of the disappeared persons are in extensive need of case management as they require extensive services and resources which include services of health care, mental health, rehabilitation, education, housing employment, and other related services. In this situation the social worker has to perform the

role of a case manager. The Case Management as an intervention requires a social worker to arrange meetings with or otherwise communicate with other agencies to identify the needed resources. There is a responsibility on the social worker to plan and devising the serves delivery systems in a systematic and timely manner.

The work of case manager involves the interface between clients and their environment. Keeping in view the condition and the position of the client system under the present study the need for case management emerges out of the fact that the client system is not in a position to meet his needs because of the inability of client system to negotiate the complex and uncoordinated human service delivery systems (Austin, 1990). The reason could be either the agencies were not providing the services or the clients were not able to make their needs known. The clients may lack the physical mobility, knowledge of resources, experience, maturity, verbal; skills, or assertiveness required to avail themselves of needed resources. The inability to meet the vital needs lands the client system in a state of dysfunctionality (McCreath, 1984, pp.436-441; Ely, 1985, pp.5-10). It can be said that the social worker is actually performing the linkage functions which involves the extensive knowledge of the needs of the families of disappeared persons and the relevant and available community resources and importantly the governmental and non-governmental programmes for their rehabilitation and welfare. It is pertinent to mention here that in case of non-availability of the resources the social worker or case manager has to perform the role of a resource developer.

The case management involves social work practitioner to provide services to individuals and families with complex, multiple problems or disabilities. Barker (1995) has explained case management as a “procedure to plan, seek, and monitor services from different social agencies and staff on behalf of the client” (p.33). Usually social worker coordinates the services, advocates for the client and sometimes controls resources and purchase services for the client. Case management also involves the monitoring of progress of a client whose needs require the services of several professionals, agencies, healthcare facilities, and human service programmes. The purpose of the case management is to assist the clients to receive the services they need by linking client to both formal and informal service networks available outside and within the community and then to follow up to ensure that the client has actually received the services required. NASW (September 1992) described the case management intervention “*as a method of providing services*

whereby a professional social worker assess the needs of the client and the family, when appropriate, and arranges, coordinates, monitors, evaluates and advocates for a package of multiple services to meet the specific client's complex needs" (p.7). The Case Management with the families of disappeared can be employed in a way either as proposed by Rothman (1992) or Greene (1992).

According to the Rothman (1992, p.3) case management actually involves two central functions:

1. Providing individualised advice, counselling and therapy to clients in community.
2. Linking clients to needed services and supports in community agencies and informal helping networks. The present study proposes the Greene's (1992, p.3) process of case management with the families of disappeared persons.

The following are the key features provided by Greene (1992) for the case management intervention:

- (i) Is a process which is based on trusting and enabling client-social worker relationship.
- (ii) Utilises the social work dual focus of understanding the person in the environment in working with client.
- (iii) Aims to ensure a continuum of care to clients with complex, multiple problems and disabilities.
- (iv) Attempts to intervene clinically to ameliorate the emotional problems accompanying illness or loss of function.
- (v) Utilises the social work skills of brokering and advocacy as a boundary-spanning approach to service delivery.
- (vi) Target clients who require a range of community-based or long term care services, encompassing economic, health/ medical, social and personal care needs.
- (vii) Requires the use of assessment of the client's functional capacity and support network in determining the level of care.
- (viii) Aims to provide services in the least restrictive environment.
- (ix) Affirms the traditional social work value of self-determination and the worth and dignity of the individual and the concept of mutual responsibility in decision making.

The intervention on the key features proposed by the Greene (1992) can be done involving the following practices with the families of the disappeared who should be able to utilise the available resources.

### **Client Identification and Outreach**

Working with families of the disappeared persons is the key to a successful intervention. In this initial stage of the case management process, consultation with the families provides information on the potential barriers and obstacles in their access to services and their utilisations. However at the community or macro level, the case manager can provide the inputs into the various policies and programmes which will in turn help in defining the scope and shape of the services to be provided to the client system.

### **Individual and Family Assessment and Diagnosis**

The case manager can use systematic data gathering skills to seek answers to the critical questions about the needed improvements in the balance within the family, and the relevant environment. This also helps in assessing the service available and any deficiency in them.

### **Planning and Resource Identification**

One of the very important aspects and a very critical intervention forming a part of case management process is to mobilise the client's problem solving capacity to develop jointly a care plan that is workable. Similarly, negotiations which require contracting skills can also be put to use with families and other providers concerning goals and expectations which is necessary before any realistic plan is determined. However at the service level, the case manager should search extensively the available and appropriate resources keeping in view the cultural sensitivity and which are relevant to the client needs. Another advantage of this aspect is that it helps in identifying the gaps in various resources.

### **Linking Clients to Needed Resources**

At this stage accessing, acquiring and even creating the needed resources for the client system is essential and central to the intervention process. The case manager should address any of the issues and specific concerns or perceived obstacles of the client system.

### **Service Implementation and Coordination**

This part requires the case manager to draw upon advanced clinical skills with the client system to assess client throughout the process of usage

of the services to reach desired goals. The case manager can provide the practical assistance to the client. The client may put requests which may be quite distinct before the case manager to which he has to address accordingly.

### **Monitoring Service Delivery**

This also has a significant value in terms of needs and perception of the client system regarding the available services and programmes for them. It has been observed that there is great trust deficit and unawareness about the schemes and policies of the state among the families of the disappeared. In this process the case manager shall ensure that the system available is accountable to the client and that the client meets the agreed upon expectations. The main task of the case manager would be to work in such a way that the process goes as it should and reports and intervenes as per needs.

### **Advocacy to Obtain Services**

The main focus of this process is the ensuring of implementation of planned strategy to ensure that power structure is responding to the specific services or resources for clients system.

### **Evaluation**

This holds a great importance as far as the process is concerned. It involves the direct engagement of case manager. The case manager should evaluate the quality, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the case management services which are provided to the client at two levels, the first being at the client level and the other at the service delivery level. Putting importance to the case management as an effective intervention strategy the case managers can also perform following functions as proposed by Rothman (1991) with families of the disappeared persons.

### **Intra-Agency Coordination**

The case manager needs to develop the effective strategy to enhance the linkage among different agencies involved in the process of addressing the problems of the families of disappeared. As it has been seen that only a couple of non-governmental organisations are working for the issues and rights of the families of disappeared persons but a good networking with

other NGOs can be a very good practice in utilising their resources both in terms in human and material aspect. This requires policies or agreements to be formulated to develop mutual trust and make referrals, this will help the case manager to identify the key persons with whom efforts to build working relationships can bear good results and also enables the case worker to proceed with his intervention smoothly.

### **Counselling**

This is another function of the case managers which can be put to use as an effective intervention strategy. In counselling, the case manager can be limited to providing information and giving advice. However, the case manager is not at all involved in identifying and exploring the psyche of the clients and is also not to be providing any therapeutic treatment, rather it will include problem solving, reality testing, socialisation skills, and practical help in areas like, housing, employment, parenting.

### **Therapy**

This function has its value mostly in the mental health settings. The case manager while employing this function can assist the clients in coping with daily problems of living. Keeping in view the issues and problems faced by the families of disappeared. This function needs a case manager to focus on the present rather than on the past issues. Another factor which needs to be taken care of while performing this function is that the families/ client system should often be involved to reinforce or maintained desired changes (Rothman, 1991, pp.521-528).

## **CONCLUSION**

There is no denying the fact that the only respite from the continuous ambiguity and pain associated with the disappeared of a family member can be over only when families know whether the disappeared person is located either dead or alive. The insensitive response from the government and inefficiency on part of the non-governmental organisations to address the issues of the families further aggravates their issues in absence of any professional model which is holistic as far as the issues of the families of disappeared persons is concerned. Given the multidimensional nature of issues faced by the families of the disappeared persons, the generalist approach would be effective to address their issues. Although the

techniques of Case Management and creation of Social Support Systems as discussed in the current paper can provide a significant benefit to the families of disappeared persons in their fight for social, legal, economic, and psychological issues. It also gives them an opportunity to have a safe and accepting environment where they do not feel isolated, worthless and neglected by the society and have a place of dignity and respect for them within the society. A number of organisations are providing numerous interventions on ground to address the issues of such families but the involvement of professional social work approach is actually disappeared.

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