



**Justice**  
Families & Friends  
of Missing Persons

# **Conversations and Connections:**

## **Support group meetings for the families of missing people**

Produced by  
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# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	5
Foreword .....	7
Introduction .....	9
Key definitions .....	11
Missing person .....	11
Family member .....	11
About FFMPU .....	13
Background .....	13
A brief history .....	13
Funding .....	13
Vision .....	14
Priorities .....	14
Service model .....	14
Services .....	14
Counselling .....	15
Ambiguous loss and its impact on families .....	17
Why group work? .....	19
The development of the FFMPU group work program .....	21
Group work model .....	23
Group work structure .....	24
Types of group programs .....	25
Assessment process and session structure .....	27
Assessment process .....	27
Session structure .....	28
Topics .....	29
1. Grief and loss .....	29
2. Ambiguous loss .....	33
3. Practical Issues – financial issues, coronial matters, counselling, dealing with the media, working with police .....	37
(a) Financial Issues .....	37
(b) Coronial matters .....	37
(c) Dealing with the media .....	38
(d) Working with the police .....	39
4. Sharing your story .....	41
5. Rituals and ceremonies .....	45
6. Raising community awareness .....	49
7. Mindfulness, meditation and self-care .....	51
8. Children, young people and grief .....	55

9. Resilience and hope ..... 57

10. Dealing with difficult information ..... 59

11. Relationships ..... 61

12. Spirituality and meaning ..... 63

References ..... 65

Appendix 1: Self-Care Assessment Worksheet ..... 68

## Acknowledgements

*Conversations and Connections: Support group meetings for the families of missing people* is the product of the collaborative labours of a number of people. The idea for such a guide was conceived in 2013 when it became apparent that rather than looking to other organisations for inspiration and guidance for the support group meetings we were initiating, we realised that the unique nature of our work and the specialist knowledge within the team, placed us in a position to write about our professional experiences and the lessons learned from our own practice with the family members and friends of missing people.

Liz Davies and Emmanuel (Manny) Kassiotis have been the lead facilitators of the Families and Friends of Missing People (FFMPU) support group program since 2010. In that time we have coordinated and facilitated over 70 support groups in various locations across NSW and the ACT (Albury, Bowral, Belconnen, Burwood, Campbelltown, Corrimal, Newcastle, Parramatta and Queanbeyan). These groups have included adults and, at times, young people. Other FFMPU counsellors have occasionally co-facilitated when Liz or Manny has been unavailable.

The following people have been involved in the publication of this guide:

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Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank all of the families and friends of missing people who have attended our groups since 2010. Whether you attended a group once, or more often, the FFMPU team appreciates the trust you place in us; the courage you have shown in sharing your story with us and other family members and friends; and the support you have reciprocated. We are richer professionally and personally for having met each of you.

Liz Davies  
Coordinator

Emmanuel Kassiotis  
Counsellor



## Foreword

Our aim in writing this booklet is to describe the theory and practice of the FFMPU support group meetings; to explain what we do, how we do it, and why we continue to facilitate these meetings that began in 2010 and continue to the current time. This booklet is not intended to replace or duplicate the information contained in other FFMPU publications.

Optimally, *Conversations and Connections* is intended for trained group leaders to facilitate support group meetings for those left behind – the partners, parents, children, and the myriad of other relationships that constitute families and friends when a loved one is missing. However this may be a useful resource for other types of groups (for example, self-help groups).

Some of the information contained in this booklet will be familiar to experienced group facilitators; but much will be new, particularly where it pertains to the experience of ambiguous loss. FFMPU support group meetings do not have a beginning, middle or an end, as many more traditional support groups do; but rather they reflect the ongoing and often unresolved nature of ambiguous loss as it relates to the loss of a missing person.

### ***Bob (a family member)***

At first, it all seemed like a waste of time to me. My feelings about Bobby were private. How could a gathering of strangers possibly ease the pain?

But I went along, as Sue felt she needed help and wanted to go.

I held closed ranks. It took a while, but I was able to relate to other people's despair. Stubborn me, I realised these meetings helped alleviate the pain and over time helped me find different tools which helped me cope with endless situations. We have become friends with other members of the FFMPU support group meetings because of our singular bond and support for each other. Help comes from unlikely sources and I am thankful for the contact with the FFMPU team and others who share our experience in helping to make this whole nightmare somewhat bearable.

### ***Sue (a family member)***

Attending an FFMPU support group meeting can be a mixed bag. If I've had a good week do I go and stir up those feelings of ambiguous loss again? But when you get there you know why you did! Being part of this special group of brave people helps you share feelings and support each other. We are with the only people who truly understand how it feels to have a missing loved one. The team of FFMPU, particularly Liz and Manny, promote and enable communication at a level that suits the group.

The FFMPU team helped us through one of our darkest hours, the coronial inquest. Liz made herself available, and was there for our entire family and friends. We had been given an opportunity to prepare ourselves, knew our rights and obligations, all because of FFMPU and the very informative Family Forums and regular meetings we attend.

Finally I would like to thank FFMPU for the work it does and often find myself wondering how they can achieve so much with such a small staff.





## Introduction

When family members and friends come together in support group meetings and share their experiences of living with the loss of a missing loved one, they discover commonalities and differences. They learn they are not alone, and that there are others who actually 'get it'. Their experience of living and struggling with 'not knowing' is affirmed, validated and normalised. They learn that there are similar and different ways of living with ambiguous loss. There can be compassion, understanding and respect for others who may live differently or similarly with 'not knowing'. There is no 'one way' or 'right way' of moving forward.

*Conversations and Connections: Support group meetings for the families of missing people* incorporates the valuable knowledge gained from family members and friends who have contact with FFMPU. Families access information and support from FFMPU through counselling, accessing social media and publications, and participating in support group meetings and other missing persons' events. The support group meetings continue to be informed and influenced by the conversations and connections that are made through their trust and ongoing feedback.

The concept of ambiguous loss, as it applies particularly to the experience of a loved one going missing, underpins all of the FFMPU support group meetings. It is therefore essential that facilitators understand ambiguous loss and the unique and complex challenges it presents. Ambiguous loss is by its very nature unclear, often unresolved and frequently unacknowledged. Unlike clear loss, there is no finality for many families and friends, and few answers or opportunities to say 'goodbye'. The community uses words like 'closure' and 'moving on' in relation to bereavement and loss. For those affected by missing, both concepts are unrealistic and likely impossible.

Ambiguity in any situation is uncomfortable. If finding solutions is necessary, then working in a situation where there are few solutions causes discomfort. For mental health professionals and other service providers who work with those left behind, it is important to recognise and be aware of one's own challenges in the presence of ambiguity. It is also important to have an understanding of the impact of ambiguous loss on families, and to recognise one's own experiences of loss and their impact.

On another level, it is important that those who come in contact with family members and friends prepare themselves for the similarities and differences that arise in families and a group work setting.

Support group meeting facilitators require:

- a well-developed understanding of ambiguous loss
- training in the facilitation of support groups combined with effective presentation skills
- an understanding of group processes and dynamics
- the ability to communicate effectively and empathically with a range of people
- sound negotiation and conflict management skills, and flexibility
- the ability to adopt and maintain a neutral stance.

Best practice necessitates the presence of two facilitators who are able to work collaboratively with trust and openness, allowing them to critically reflect on their practice and the changing dynamics of each support group meeting.

This booklet is divided into two sections. The first section provides background information about FFMPU and its history, and the development, design and structure of the FFMPU support group program. The second section outlines a number of topics that pertain to the experiences of families of missing people. The topics are informed by the conversations with, and feedback from family members.

The support group meetings have been designed to:

- promote mutual support and connection between individuals and families
- promote the development of resilience to cope with the ongoing experience of ambiguous loss
- provide information and psycho-education to assist those left behind to better understand the impacts of missing, and their individual, sometimes different responses.

## **Key definitions**

### **Missing person**

A missing person is defined as 'anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person' (NSW Police Force, 2015).

### **Family member**

The term 'family member' has been used throughout this guide to include family members, friends or other significant relationships.



# About FFMPU

## Background

FFMPU is a specialised support and information service for family members experiencing the loss of a missing person. FFMPU began operation in 2000 following extensive lobbying for funding by family members and service providers, who identified the need for such support.

When someone is first reported missing the primary focus is on searching and locating the missing person. Seeking emotional support, accessing counselling or meeting other families with similar experiences may not be identified as a priority. For individuals and families the impact of a loved one going missing is a profound experience. Contact between the FFMPU team and those left behind highlights the need for family members to connect with others in a similar situation.

## A brief history

- 1978 Family members of missing loved ones meet in Sydney.
- 1979 Family members continue to meet with representation from agencies within the missing persons sector. Representatives include Salvation Army, NSW Police Missing Persons Unit, International Social Services and Commonwealth Bank.
- 1983 First official group in Australia is formed by parents of a missing child in Melbourne – *Parents of Missing Children*.
- 1988
  - Missing persons committee established.
  - Launch of Missing Persons Week: main purpose is to raise community awareness of missing person's issues.
- 1989 Families and Friends of Missing Persons support group commences in NSW.
- 1990 Families and Friends of Missing Persons support group formed in Queensland involving the Lions Club and Salvation Army.
- 2000 Establishment of FFMPU in Sydney.
- 2004 Telephone support group trialled by Mission Australia – open to regional and metropolitan areas in NSW.
- 2009 FFMPU facilitates the first Family Forum.
- 2010 FFMPU received funding for a part time group work counsellor position. A face-to-face support group established in Burwood, meeting monthly for six months.
- 2011 FFMPU support groups became known as information sessions.
- 2012 FFMPU group work program extended outside of Sydney, with three regional groups established in Queanbeyan, Wollongong and Newcastle.
- 2013 Permanent group work counsellor position established and upgraded from part time to full time.

## Funding

The unit is funded by the NSW Government and is part of the Department of Justice. FFMPU is currently the only government-funded unit in Australia offering support and information to individuals and families experiencing the loss of a missing person. The team consists of qualified social workers and psychologists.

## Vision

The families and friends of all missing persons in NSW have access to relevant and effective information and support services.

## Priorities

The FFMPU has adopted the following objectives:

1. To provide a specialist counselling service to families and friends of missing persons.
2. To establish and maintain an Interagency Forum across government and non-government agencies.
3. To provide an information, referral and support service for families and friends of missing persons.
4. To develop relevant policies.
5. To promote administrative, legislative and social reform.
6. To produce high quality publications to assist families and friends of missing persons.
7. To raise community awareness regarding the issues affecting families and friends of missing persons.

## Service model

FFMPU endeavours to provide compassionate and respectful support in working with families and in line with their identified needs. The services offered are specifically tailored to the needs of families impacted by the loss of a missing person, and are informed by the research and literature relating to the experience of families of missing people and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006; Boss, 2002; Wayland, 2007).

## Services

Families and friends of missing people report that making contact with FFMPU is helpful for a number of reasons. For some it is being able to access information about missing persons' issues and events; for others it is having a safe and non-threatening environment to talk about their experiences; and to hear and learn about the experience of others who have someone missing.

FFMPU provides:

- free and confidential counselling, information, and referral to families and friends of missing people
- support by phone, online, face-to-face, or Skype
- assistance at different times during a missing person's investigation, for example through media involvement, coronial proceedings, support and referral when a missing person is located
- liaison with service providers, including police and the Coroners Court
- information and publications on a range of missing persons' issues
- help understanding and navigating agencies and processes in the missing persons' sector
- community education about missing persons' issues
- organisation of missing persons' events, for example, the Family Forum
- clinical support and advice to other professionals regarding missing persons' issues.

## Counselling

Counselling is offered face-to-face and via phone and email, to meet the needs of family members who reside locally, interstate, and at times, internationally.

### ***Individual and client focused***

Families sometimes feel pressure to 'find closure' and accept solutions when few answers are known. Counselling provided by FFMPU is flexible and open-ended, to support families living with the unresolved loss associated with not knowing.

Sessions occur individually or at times with others in a group (may include couples, parents, children, siblings, other relatives, friends, colleagues of a missing person) depending on individual need.

Services are flexible and designed to meet the individual and varying needs of family members. Contact and support may be short term, sporadic or ongoing, recognising that family members may be emotionally triggered by significant dates, anniversaries, contact with police or media, or simple daily events, and that the pain can continue as long as the experience of missing remains unresolved.

Counselling means different things to different people. One family member who has ongoing involvement with the service does not define the conversations he has with counsellors by phone, in person, or in groups, as 'counselling', but continues to engage with and communicate with the FFMPU team in this way.

### ***Focus of counselling***

Counselling is focused on incorporating the loss rather than the situation resolving. Counsellors work with family members towards identifying coping mechanisms, normalising feelings and reactions, developing a tolerance for the ambiguity of not knowing, tempering the need to find answers and the desire for control, finding new hope and meaning and creating new connections to the missing person.

FFMPU counsellors provide the opportunity for those 'left behind' to share experiences, coping strategies, develop resilience, and normalise and validate their experience. Connection with others reduces isolation and encourages acceptance of differing views or opinions within a family about what has happened.





## Ambiguous loss and its impact on families

The loss experienced by the families of missing people is complex. While there are commonly shared experiences, there are differences between individuals and within families.

Some of the common experiences include:

- Confusion: it is difficult for individuals to know how to make sense of a situation when it is not known if the loss is temporary or final.
- Changes and conflict in usual relationships and among family members. Conflict is more likely when there are few answers and individuals form different beliefs about what may have happened to the missing loved one.
- Distress that is often not validated, recognised or talked about in society.
- Physical and emotional exhaustion over time.
- The re-evaluation of an individual's perception of the world.

The group program evolved from ongoing conversations with family members about common impacts of ambiguous loss, particularly feelings of isolation and the experience of living with a loss that is little-understood. These conversations highlighted the need to facilitate pathways for individuals to connect, share their experiences, and to gain mutual support.



## Why group work?

Research indicates that belonging to a support group can be a valuable resource to assist people to cope. Support groups can provide participants with a space to share their experience with others in a similar situation and to help reduce feelings of distress and loneliness. The groups facilitated by FFMPU have been designed to do this, and offer a pathway for individuals to connect with each other to gain mutual support.

### ***Target audience***

The families and friends support group meetings are for individuals experiencing the loss of a missing person.

The metropolitan and regional meetings are open to adults who live with the loss of a missing person.

FFMPU has also facilitated a group specifically for young people, named “In the Loop”. Those who initially attended were between the ages of 11 and 16 years.

FFMPU recognises that individuals will vary in their need to attend a support group meeting. For this reason, our criterion for group eligibility is based on individual circumstances rather than on how long a person has been missing, or the relationship of the missing person to those left behind. Support group meetings are therefore open to family members who are parents, partners, children, siblings or any other significant relationship.

### ***Theoretical framework***

FFMPU support group meetings combine psycho-education, therapy and self-help, including a mutual-aid approach where participants within each group help and support each other.

The approach is informed by:

- an understanding of ambiguous loss and missing persons’ issues
- participant feedback and evaluations
- knowledge of group work practice in relation to trauma, grief and loss, especially ambiguous loss
- clinical experience and learning what has and has not worked with this client group, based on feedback and ongoing evaluation.



## The development of the FFMPU group work program

In 2010 FFMPU established its first face-to-face support group. The original group met monthly on a Saturday for six months at a community centre. The initial purpose was to provide emotional and practical support to families and friends of missing persons. There was a mix of formal and informal sessions, allowing for planned presentations from service providers and less structured discussion between participants. Invitations were sent to everyone on the FFMPU mailing list, and the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit distributed invitations using their own mailing list. The following quotes are from group participants describing their experiences of support group meetings.

*Good to share other families' experience and support; helpful to speak to other families about their situation and how they cope.*

*I would have to say to others who have a missing loved one not to give up hope and try to stay positive as hard as that may be to do.*

After an evaluation of the program in 2011, several changes were made. Instead of meeting on a monthly basis, it was agreed that meetings would be held bi-monthly. A guest speaker was invited for the first half of the meeting to provide a formal presentation. The second half of the meeting was used for a general, less formal discussion and afternoon tea. Topics covered in the formal presentation included the coronial process, financial management and the role of police in missing persons' investigations.

FFMPU recognises the importance of access to support services for family members and friends in rural and regional areas. In 2012, support group meetings commenced in Queanbeyan, Wollongong and Newcastle. These locations were chosen based on the highest number of clients in a particular area who indicated they would like to attend a support group meeting.

The FFMPU support group meetings are open-ended, ongoing, and people are able to come in and out of group meetings as they choose. The meetings allow family members and friends to come together and share their experience of having a loved one missing. Importantly, the meetings also allow people an opportunity to share their ways of living with ambiguous loss. Many clients report that they find attending the groups challenging and sometimes confronting, but equally their experience is that they are beneficial and rewarding. Families also report that living with a loved one who is missing is an incredibly lonely experience and one that few others understand unless they too live with the loss of a missing person. Attending the support group meetings can help to reduce feelings of loneliness.

*I would certainly mention the group to other families of a missing loved one, but believe it is a personal decision to attend.*

*It is helpful to provide practical strategies for people to help missing persons' families to deal with their grief as time passes and the person remains missing.*

*It is good to know that there are different ways people cope with grief.*

*Meeting up with people in similar situations helps me feel I am not alone and that I have support.*

### Feedback from clients

The service provided by FFMPU through support group meetings is unique. Some clients who have previously engaged in individual counselling in the community report negative experiences of counselling – of feeling little-understood, or that the counsellor is wanting to 'fix' the difficulties they are experiencing. For this reason some are reluctant to consider the possibility of engaging in counselling again, but are more willing to consider the possibility of attending a support group meeting.

Initially, a closed group was considered, and arrangements were made to put this in place. However, it quickly became apparent through feedback provided by clients that a closed group did not meet the needs of those wishing and able to attend, who indicated their preference for an 'open' group. The clients reported that they felt pressure to commit to attending and preferred the flexibility to choose which meetings to attend, and to opt in or out. They also reported that as their experience of having a loved one missing continues, they prefer knowing there is an open group that is available to them, if and when they need it. The closed group was seen as being of time-limited, while they might have to continue to live with their loved one being missing.

One of the key aspects on which clients agree is that they can be open and honest about their feelings and there is less need to censor what they want to say in support group meetings. Most clients also report that the length of time their loved one has been missing makes little difference to the difficulties that families face following such a loss.

The majority of clients also agree that there can be feelings of guilt associated with day-to-day living. Clients report feeling guilty if they manage to enjoy themselves during social activities; or if they manage to get through a whole day and have somehow not thought about their missing loved one. As time goes by and significant family events occur, there can be guilt associated with the missing person 'missing out' on these events.

*At times there has been some unexpected relief from grieving.*

*Initially I thought the group would be beneficial to me alone. However, I have learnt that through interacting with the facilitators and others who understand missing, I am able to contribute to the group and offer support to others, which is extremely satisfying.*

*Sharing feelings, thoughts and emotions with others who can relate to my experience results in feelings of empowerment and the confidence to raise awareness about missing in the wider community.*

Many clients report that some of the most difficult family events are weddings or the birth of a baby. They report that these events can be bittersweet and quite confronting. On the one hand there is joy and happiness at what is considered a celebration; while on the other, there is sadness and loss, because the missing loved one is not physically present. It is yet another stark reminder of life moving forward without the missing loved one's presence in it.

## **Challenges for FFMPU**

**Ambiguity/uncertainty.** One of the challenges of facilitating support group meetings for family members has been the potential for their situation to change suddenly, or alternatively for there to be little change as their loved one continues to be missing.

**Population variance.** The challenge of a relatively small number of available participants, the diversity of their individual experiences and the circumstances of each missing person's matter, make for, at times, potentially diverse groups.

**Geographical distance.** The families of missing people are widely dispersed geographically, with lower population densities outside capital cities. FFMPU has clients from all over NSW, interstate and internationally, and FFMPU is based in Sydney. Distance can be a prohibitive factor in the decision to attend a support group meeting.

**Unique nature.** To date there has been no established group work model for working with families who have experienced ambiguous loss in relation to the loss of a missing person in Australia.

## **Group members**

An evaluation of FFMPU facilitated support group meetings has found that participants are less likely to attend on an ongoing basis if their loved one has been missing for less than two years (FFMPU, 2013). The needs of these family members can be significantly different to those whose loved one has been missing longer-term. Consideration needs to be given as to whether those with a more recent experience of a loved one going missing derive benefit from attending a support group meeting and having contact with family members who might have lived with their loved one missing for a longer period. For some the need to connect with others who share a similar experience is foremost in their minds; while for others the possibility of meeting family members who have lived with the loss of a missing loved one for a longer period, sometimes many years, is a prospect they do not want to contemplate.

Once group members develop a sense of belonging and connection with each other, they recognise how their participation and contribution to the group helps others. Knowing that other group members share similar thoughts, feelings and experiences creates a sense of mutual understanding (FFMPU, 2013a).

## **Facilitators**

The role of the facilitator is similar to that described by Linnell and Cora (1993) in relation to the drop-in support group programme, where the facilitator is less interventionist, using specific questions or topic areas to open the discussion and extend existing understanding, while holding a 'not knowing' position about the personal experience of family members. While group facilitators bring their own expertise, there is a dual process of learning, with FFMPU counsellors learning from group members about their experience and what is helpful.

The group work program continues to evolve to meet the needs of participants. Thus, both facilitators and group members come together with the shared purpose of finding and learning ways of living with 'not knowing'.

## **Group work model**

Most FFMPU groups are open-ended and ongoing. While there is a core group of regular participants, the groups are always open to new members.

The first closed group facilitated by FFMPU was 'In the Loop' in 2013. This group targeted young people between the ages of 11 and 16. The group met approximately bi-monthly over a 12 month period and unlike other FFMPU groups had a clear beginning, middle and end.

The FFMPU group work model combines therapy, education, self-help and mutual support. While topics are planned in advance, these may shift to accommodate topics that group participants wish to discuss on the day, possibly prompted by a recent experience or a media report. Some similarities also exist to a shared counselling model (Gilbert, 2005), where session topics are determined, at least in part, by group members according to need and relevance. Unlike shared counselling, the group is ongoing and open, with longer times between meetings, rather than a closed group of time-limited duration.

As Boss (2006) describes, there is a need for a collaborative approach, encouraging family members to tell their story, witness others telling their story, and developing connections with others who understand their experience.

## ***Elements of FFMPU group development***

<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Ongoing</b>
Assessment phase and orienting: address purpose/aim of group	Building mutual support, cohesiveness, trust	No set end point
Establishing group rules: confidentiality, safety	Promoting community connectedness, establish support network	Flexible: participants may drop in and out of the group – may access alternative/concurrent support depending on individual needs – returning to the group is not seen as a failure
	Identifying and setting goals relevant to the group: acknowledging goals and also session format may change from session to session	
Reinforce beginning stage of the group when a new member enters the group	Psycho-education	Individual circumstances may change, for example missing person found. May exit the group at anytime.

## **Group work structure**

### ***Leadership***

The two FFMPU team members who co-facilitate each group, share pre-group planning and facilitation tasks. Having two facilitators allows time for individual support for participants, if required, and the opportunity for debriefing and peer support.

### ***Group participants and size***

FFMPU group attendance varies and is determined by client availability and group location. Open groups are characterised by changing membership with no limit on the number of groups clients attend, having the advantage of serving a greater variety of people (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010). The number of participants who have attended FFMPU groups has varied from two to 16 family members. FFMPU facilitators consider the ideal number of group participants to be between 6-8, to allow discussion and create opportunities for sharing of ideas and connection with others, while allowing adequate time and support for each attendee. Some participants choose to attend groups in more than one location, sometimes travelling considerable distances to do so.



## **Types of group programs**

### ***Metropolitan and regional groups***

Ongoing and open groups for adult family members of missing people are offered in metropolitan (Campbelltown) and regional (Wollongong and Queanbeyan, Belconnen) locations, with groups previously offered at Parramatta and Newcastle dependent on client interest and availability. Groups are offered up to six times per year in some locations, while in others up to three times per year. Meetings are two hours duration.

More recently support group meetings have been offered in more geographically distant locations where a number of potential participants have indicated interest.

### ***In the Loop***

FFMPU developed a program for young people who have a missing family member. *In the Loop* gives young people an opportunity to meet others in a similar situation, to talk about their individual experience and share ideas for living with missing. As mentioned previously, *In the Loop*, to date, is the only group offered by FFMPU that has been a 'closed' group.

The majority of *In the Loop* group meetings took place in the Southern Highlands; as geographically this is the half-way point for those who attended.

### ***The Family Forum***

FFMPU hosts an annual Family Forum, providing opportunities for family members and service providers to meet and talk about missing persons' issues. The Family Forum combines presentations by FFMPU staff, guest speakers on relevant topics, and roundtable discussions and consultation with family members on particular topics. The Forum also provides an opportunity for family members to meet and connect with each other.



## Assessment process and session structure

### Assessment process

Most family members who have attended a support group meeting have previously had contact with one or more members of the FFMPU team. Rather than a formal process of assessment, information from family members emerges as trust develops.

FFMPU counsellors endeavour to meet or speak with those who are interested in attending, prior to the first support group meeting. This allows time to provide information about group meetings, as well as assessing individual expectations, timeliness and readiness to attend. Sharing information about support group meetings can help to reduce normal feelings of anxiety that may be present prior to attending any, but in particular, the first group meeting.

Facilitators are mindful of whether participating in a group meeting is likely to be a positive experience, and appropriate for the individual support needs of a family member; as well as considering the impact a new participant may have on the existing group.

All groups are advertised at least one week before the planned meeting. Confirmation of attendance prior to the day is sought to assist preparation; however, facilitators need to be prepared for the possibility that a family member may attend without confirming, or a new family member, with no prior contact with FFMPU, may attend on the day.

In reflecting on a potential participant's involvement in the group, it may be helpful to consider the following:

**Engagement with FFMPU** – including participant's history of phone, email and face-to-face contact.

**Understanding of the group and topic areas** that may be covered, including confidentiality and safety within the group.

**The participant's hopes, aims and own assessment of their needs** and how these fit with the purpose of the group and topics that may be discussed.

**Brief overview of missing person's case**, including details of the officer-in-charge and Local Area Command involved.

The following may need particular consideration:

**Length of time the loved one has been missing** – The needs of family members vary widely and can change significantly over time. The needs of a family member of a loved one who has been missing for a relatively short period of time can sometimes be very different to the needs of a family member where someone has been missing for many years.

**Circumstances of missing** – A family member whose loved one has disappeared in particularly traumatic circumstances and may be the subject of a homicide investigation may have different needs to those of a participant whose loved one is missing in different circumstances. Consideration should be given not just to the needs of the participant in the context of their particular circumstances, but also the impact on other group members. Particular consideration needs to be given to the impact on individuals if a missing loved one is located deceased. Balancing the needs of individuals and the impact of distressing information on other participants who may not be prepared for the details, needs to be carefully considered.

**Relationship with missing person** – Relationships within the family and tolerance of differences in perception, meaning and beliefs can lead to conflict. Different views and opinions may be held, which have the potential to impact the comfort of all attending a support group meeting.

**Current supports** – the availability of, and access to, formal and informal supports networks needs to be considered.

**Current stressors** – other factors that may impact on attending group at this time, including family and other health issues, Coroners or other court proceedings

**Family relationships and dynamics** – whether other family members may be participating, and the potential impact on the participant, group members and facilitators, especially if there is intra-familial conflict or tension.

**Accessibility** – distance from the group may be an issue to address. Where a group member is some distance from the group, any pre-group information gathering may need to occur via phone or Skype.

## **Session structure**

Every session starts with 10-15 minutes for participants to ‘catch up’ with facilitators and each other, allowing participants to re-connect with those they have met previously, and first time participants to interact informally with others.

Dependent on the progression of the session, a break for morning or afternoon tea occurs either halfway through, or at the end of the session, allowing time for informal discussion.

Topics for discussion contained within this guide are not designed to be sequential, but rather as preferred by families. Each session is approximately 1½ hours in duration, dependent on the amount of discussion generated, allowing ½ hour for ‘catch up’ and breaks.

## Topics

### 1. Grief and loss

Approaches to grief and loss have traditionally focused on more readily recognised and acknowledged losses, such as death; that are tangible, physical and irreversible. These approaches do not always sit comfortably with the loss of a missing person, and especially do not apply when a person remains missing; making the grief and loss associated with missing very different to that of most other losses.

Traditional grief and loss models describe psychological stages of coping and coming to terms with the loss experienced. Many suggest a beginning, middle and end point, at which acceptance occurs, that the loved one is gone forever (Kubler-Ross, 1986; Pollock, 1989; Worden, 1991). The loss experienced by family members of a missing loved one is both unusual and outside the normal range of human experience.

The experience of family members does not follow such stages or sequence of events, and the loss can be ongoing in nature, with impacts felt on a daily basis. As with other experiences of grief and loss, there can be times when people are triggered by different events. Triggers can include anniversaries, significant dates, or media attention of missing persons' cases; and may be confronting for those left behind.

The social expectation to find closure is not relevant or can be potentially unhelpful for the experience of missing, due to the ambiguity surrounding the circumstances of missing, and the situation of those left behind. Over the years there have been many discussions with family members and friends who have a loved one missing about the word "closure." What does this mean? Is it possible to be used in relation to the experience of having a loved one missing? Most family members are vehement that the term does not apply.

A missing person is no longer considered missing once they have been located, returned or positively identified. Unfortunately for some family members and friends once their missing loved one is located there is a collective societal response that they will have 'closure'. This is something with which many family members and loved ones disagree. At FFMPU we do not talk about closure, and do not use the term in group meetings. Exceptions to this occur when family members choose to use the term to describe a part of their experience.

#### **Grieving styles**

Over time, there has been a shift away from the more traditional view of grief occurring in stages, to a recognition of a more individual grieving style, working towards creating a new and different relationship with the loved one (Yalom, 2010). The way individuals experience and respond to a loss is influenced by factors including culture, gender, messages learned about grief growing up, personality and the circumstances of the loss.

Martin and Doka (2011) suggest that there are different styles of grieving:

**Intuitive grievers** or '**heart grievers**' who experience and express grief as deep feelings; where adaptation occurs through expression and exploration of these feelings.

Intuitive grievers adapt or manage grief by:

- expressing their grief by sharing their inner experiences and feelings with others; and
- exploring their inner experience or feelings by journaling, talking to someone.

**Instrumental grievers** experience and express grief in ways that are more physical, cognitive and behavioural; where adaptation involves thinking and doing.

**Intellectual, or 'head grievers'** grief is experienced and expressed more intellectually, and through behaviour. Guilt can be a common feeling experienced. Feelings associated with grief are still experienced, but may be held back and appear composed.

Instrumental grievers adapt or manage grief by:

- engaging in intellectual or practical activities to regain a sense of control; and
- making meaning by engaging in activities, and taking action to prevent similar future losses.

This topic has at times been used to open the conversation in support group meetings about the different ways people experience and express grief. Family members and other loved ones of a missing person welcome new information, helping them to better understand what they and others are going through. This topic has been both useful and quite powerful for those attending support group meetings, and is often reflected on and discussed at subsequent meetings.

### ***Disenfranchised grief***

The concept of disenfranchised grief was developed by Kenneth Doka to describe the grief experienced when a loss is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Doka, 1989). Doka (2002) developed this concept to cover a wide range of losses:

**The relationship is not recognised** – where there are no recognisable kinship ties, the relationship is not publicly recognised, or the relationship existed primarily in the past.

**The loss is not acknowledged** – the loss is not socially defined as significant, and includes perinatal death; adoption, foster care or surrogacy; the loss of a companion animal; 'psychological death' such as coma or illness, or 'psychosocial death' such as mental illness, brain injury.

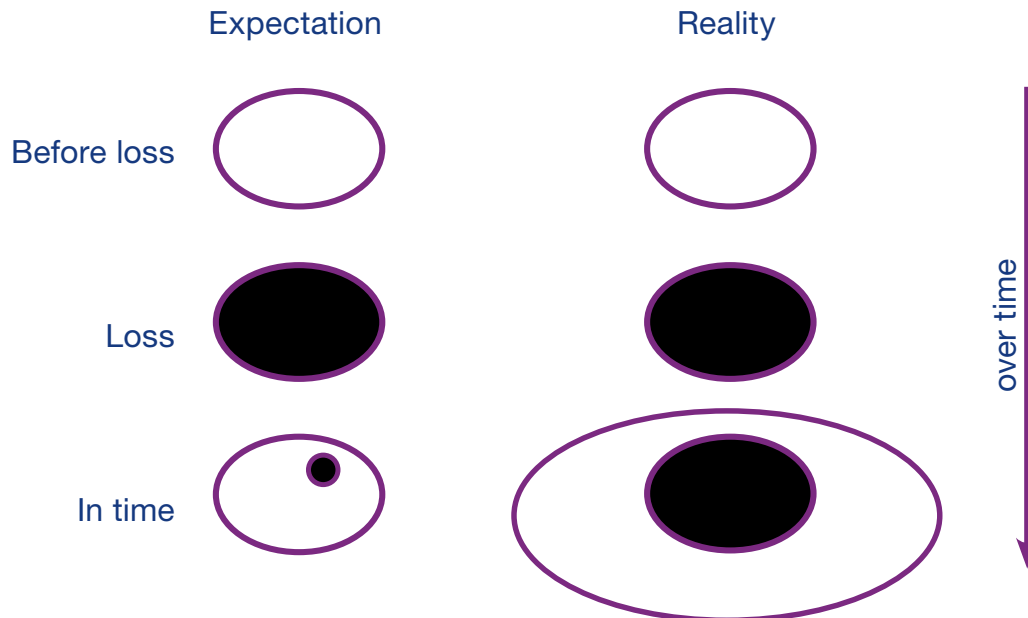
**The griever is excluded** – the person may be defined as not capable of grief, including the elderly, young children, or people with an intellectual disability or mental illness.

**Circumstances of the death** – stigma surrounding the death may constrain accessing support, for example, suicide, AIDS-related loss where the bereaved may fear social responses such as isolation, judgement or morbid curiosity.

### **Lois Tonkin – growing around grief**

Dr Lois Tonkin (2008) developed the ‘circles of grief’ to represent growth around the experience of grief. Family members in support group meetings have reflected on its relevance for them.

An adaption of the circles of grief, shared in group meetings, appears below:



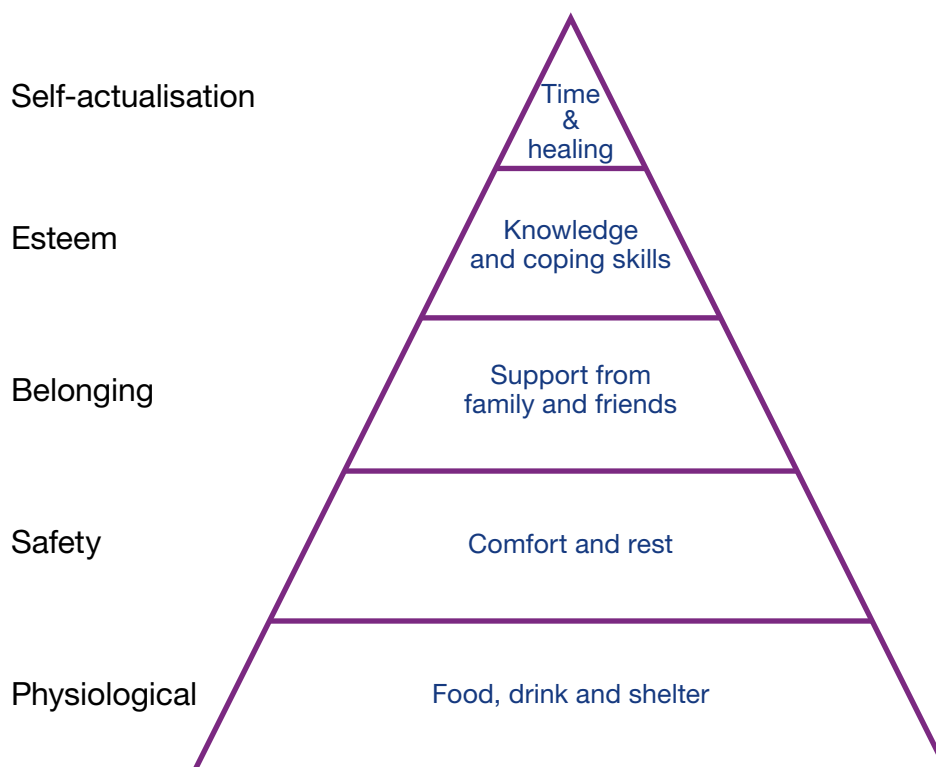
Briefly, if life is imagined as a circle (or ellipse) when a traumatic loss such as a loved one going missing occurs, life can become completely shaded by grief and it can be almost impossible to imagine feeling any different.

Rather than grief shrinking and becoming a ‘small’ part of life (the expectation), the grief can remain unchanged in ‘size’; and life begins to grow around the grief (the reality). Tonkin (2008) suggests that it is possible to experience some pleasure and feel enthusiasm for life over time.

There are times when reminders of the loss, such as a photograph, song, anniversary or smell can mean “you can find yourself back in the shade for a while” (Tonkin, 2008, p.23). This may happen months or years later and is a natural response to loss. The grief can feel just as intense, but increasingly life can be lived in the circle that has grown around the grief.

## **Maslow's hierarchy of needs**

Maslow (1998) proposed that basic physiological needs must be attended to before moving onto higher order needs. In the early days following the loss of a loved one, time is spent focusing on basic survival needs, with the emotional impact of the loss dominating thoughts and experiences.



Maslow's hierarchy has been used in support group meetings to affirm and validate the experience of family members; especially the notion of 'basic survival', while reinforcing the need and challenge of having basic needs recognised and met.

### **Discussion questions**

- Reflect on the way you express feelings of grief. What is helpful and unhelpful for you?
- Are there differences in the way your family members express their grief?
  - Do these differences sometimes create tensions within the family?
  - What has helped you and your family acknowledge these differences?
- How do you support each other within your family?

NOTE: It is important to mention that one grieving style is not more effective than another. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Grieving styles are a way of understanding how individuals experience and express and their grief.



## 2. Ambiguous loss

Pauline Boss describes two types of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006):

- a) When a person is physically absent but psychologically present (includes missing people, kidnapped children, soldiers missing in action, divorce, adoption, separation due to immigration); and
- b) When a person is psychologically absent but physically present (includes dementia, brain injury, mental illness, drug and alcohol addictions).

### ***The lived experience***

Ambiguous loss has been described as a loss that defies closure due to ambiguity. It is the most stressful kind of loss due to being unclear, indeterminate and often unacknowledged (Boss, 1999).

Families cannot 'problem solve' the loss because they do not know yet whether the 'problem' is final or temporary. The ambiguity complicates the mourning process. "People can't start grieving because the situation is indeterminate. It feels like a loss but it is not really one. The confusion freezes the grieving process. People plummet from hope to hopelessness and back again," (Boss, 1999, p.10-11).

It has been said that not knowing is the hardest thing, resulting in intense psychological and emotional distress. This is something repeatedly expressed in support group meetings.

*I can't get hold of this situation – there is nothing to hang onto. It is like a rollercoaster.*

### ***The impact***

For those who live with not knowing what has happened to their loved one, a myriad of impacts is experienced on a daily basis. Some of the feelings associated with the experience of a loved one going missing are similar to those experienced following trauma. They may include:

- Anxiety, guilt or hopelessness
- Focusing on imagined outcomes
- Feeling frozen
- Confusion and/or distress
- Alterations in systems and meaning
- Hypervigilance
- Inability to experience joy from normally pleasurable activities
- A feeling of impending doom
- A feeling of being numb to the life that surrounds them
- Financial and relationship difficulties
- A sense of isolation or loneliness
- Physical and emotional exhaustion.

## **Living with ambiguous loss**

Pauline Boss states that with ambiguous loss, the challenge for those left behind is to find ways to live with ambiguous loss. Regular discussions and conversations occur in group meetings around ambiguous loss and what this means for individuals. For some family members and loved ones, it is at a such a meeting that they may hear the term 'ambiguous loss' for the first time, a powerful experience for some people.

Living with and understanding ambiguous loss may include some of the following (Boss, 1999):

**Naming the experience:** Ambiguous loss is present in missing. As one family member stated on learning about ambiguous loss, *it validated my feelings*. Naming the experience provides families with clarity and confirmation that what they are experiencing is real.

**Recognising that confusion and feelings of helplessness are due to the ambiguity:** In the early days of someone being reported missing there can be feelings of confusion, bewilderment and uncertainty as to what may or may not have happened.

**Learning to live with uncertainty/not knowing:** This may eventually include finding a form of *spiritual acceptance*.

**Redefining their relationship with the missing loved one:** This includes finding ways to *reconstruct family roles, rules and rituals*.

**Continuation of family traditions and rituals to include the missing person:** When a loved one is reported missing and remains missing long-term there are no rituals associated with this. A recurring theme often discussed in group meetings is centred on creating rituals to include missing loved ones

**Finding ways to maintain hope:** As family members try to live with ambiguity. This may include: self-advocacy and helping others in similar situations.

**Balance:** Is found between spending time with others and engaging in 'active' coping behaviours, and 'passive' coping behaviours (that is, time out). Often people have days where it is more difficult for them than other days.

Pauline Boss stresses the importance of naming ambiguity, to understand the impact of ambiguous loss and to realise that reactions to ambiguous loss are not abnormal, nor an indication of personal weakness.

The families we talk with echo this belief; that it is important to be able to name the type of loss they are experiencing, to provide some kind of framework of understanding.

*Listening to you describe ambiguous loss enables me to identify exactly what I am going through. [It is] good to let others and especially family and friends know what it is and to talk about it. I think it is important to see what we are going through is real and has a name. It is good to have a definition in an environment that does not always seem real and does not always make sense.*  
(FFMPU, 2014e, p.25).

Alongside grief and loss, a connection with the missing person and a hope for their return continues; an important difference from traditional staged grief and loss models. Hunter Institute of Mental Health (2001) noted that while the number of family members and friends of missing persons seeking counselling might be small, the diversity of issues, absence of research, and lack of fit with common theoretical models on loss requires counsellors to be highly experienced and aware of complex issues.

Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 2006) recognises that:

- the combination of loss and ambiguity creates a powerful barrier to coping and grieving, with grief and trauma ongoing for as long as the missing continues
- ambiguous loss is a relational disorder characterised by the ambiguity of both presence and absence, therefore requiring a relational and resilience-based response
- the development of resilience occurs more easily in the presence of others who have had similar losses, extending human connection beyond the counsellor, family and community.

#### **Discussion questions**

- How do you notice the psychological presence of your loved one?
- How would you describe your experience of ambiguous loss? What are some of your thoughts and feelings associated with this?
- What has helped you to live with not knowing?



### **3. Practical Issues – financial issues, coronial matters, counselling, dealing with the media, working with police**

#### **(a) Financial Issues**

When a person is missing there can be difficulties in managing their financial affairs and property. This can be one of the most challenging obstacles that family members and other loved ones have to navigate. Unfortunately this is a very complicated area and individual circumstances add to the complexity of this situation.

There are short and long-term implications regarding financial and property affairs for those who have been reported missing. Loved ones often assume the responsibility for maintaining rental agreements, insurance, registration, and other financial responsibilities. Some families are able to sustain this for some years, while for others this is not possible. Support group meetings can be a time to reflect and share individual experiences, while exchanging helpful ideas. Ultimately financial and legal matters are best resolved through referral to relevant agencies.

#### ***NSW Trustee and Guardian Act***

Under the *NSW Trustee and Guardian Act 2009*, an application can be made to the Supreme Court to have someone appointed to manage the estate of the missing person.

The court can declare the person missing and appoint a person (such as a family member) to manage the estate, or the estate is managed by NSW Trustee and Guardian, for which a fee is charged.

#### **NSW Trustee and Guardian**

Phone 1300 360 466

Web [www.tag.nsw.gov.au](http://www.tag.nsw.gov.au)

#### **(b) Coronial matters**

Family members often raise concerns or seek to better understand the coronial investigation, their rights as family members to access and review information, to participate in an inquest, or in anticipation of the findings. Families may also be concerned about the impact the coronial investigation and the Coroner's findings may have on their wellbeing, the hope of finding their missing loved one, and their experience of ongoing, unresolved loss.

#### ***Coronial guide***

Group facilitators can access information about the coronial process, and the role of the coroner in the FFMPU publication: *A guide to coronial services in NSW for families and friends of missing people* (FFMPU, 2014).

#### ***Taking care of yourself***

The coronial process can impact family members emotionally, mentally and physically.

It can be helpful to identify: key times support may be needed; who is attending an inquest; how information is shared within and outside the family; whether a family member should be appointed as the family representative; and how children are to be kept informed.

## **(c) Dealing with the media**

### ***Involvement with the media***

In the initial stages of the search for a missing person, police or family may make the decision to involve the media to help raise community awareness and encourage people who may have information to come forward.

Given individual differences in each investigation, it is important to discuss media involvement with the officer in charge prior to contacting the media. Types of media coverage may include television, radio, newspaper, internet and social media.

### ***Challenges***

Direct contact with the media can sometimes raise concerns for family members. The media may sometimes focus on sensitive information that families would prefer to keep private.

*They asked me things about her mental health, but I didn't think it was relevant in finding her* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.49).

Media reports may trigger a range of feelings, from hope that an answer may be found to anxiety and despair:

*We want her found...my heart stops every time we hear news stories about bodies being found* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.49).

You may be asked questions about what might have happened to a missing person. Think about how you might respond prior to media contact. Try to be conscious of the missing person and their privacy, if they were to return, and what information you are prepared to have made public.

### ***Impact of media coverage***

Apart from the personal impact of dealing with the media in relation to their own matter, family members and friends of missing people can be affected by media reports about unrelated missing persons.

One of the consequences of the support group meetings is that families become aware of, and meet other families who are also impacted by having a loved one missing. There is a sense of connection with each other, and an awareness of other people's stories. When a missing person's case is reported in the media, the initial impact may be to trigger a personal response; however, there is also an impact on family members because of the empathy they feel for others with whom they've become personally connected.

The impact of media coverage is something that is often discussed and there have been occasions when high profile missing persons' cases prompt discussion in support group meetings.

### ***Social media***

Social media, such as Facebook, offers another way for some family members to engage with the media and wider community. A large number of websites and social media pages exist that focus on the search and location of missing persons. The use of social media for this purpose has increased during the past 10 years, raising awareness of individual cases and increasing the visibility and possibility of sightings across a wider geographical area.

The FFMPU Facebook page provides another avenue for family members, friends and the wider community to access online supports and information, related to having a missing loved one.

FFMPU Facebook page can be accessed at: [www.facebook.com/missing.persons.501](https://www.facebook.com/missing.persons.501)

## **(d) Working with the police**

### ***Ongoing police involvement***

The police investigation, ongoing contact and involvement with the police is a topic frequently raised and discussed by family members in support group meetings. This is particularly evident when a 'new' person attends a support group meeting. There is understandable curiosity about their experience. In addition to the new person talking about their missing loved one, their experience of the contact with police prompts further discussion.

### ***What families have shared is helpful***

- Contact with the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit to receive support.
- Where police are aware of, or are open to learning the procedures related to a missing person's investigation.
- Where the Officer in Charge (OIC) keeps the family informed of the progress of the investigation.

### ***What families have shared is unhelpful***

- Where police have limited communication with families.
- Where limited information is provided without explanation.
- Where there is limited understanding of the family's experience when a loved is missing.

### ***Factors that contribute to family members experience of police***

- Police officer's knowledge of practices and procedures in relation to missing person's investigations and reporting.
- Whether the OIC has been involved in a missing persons case before.
- Availability of the OIC, including timeliness of contact, responding to messages, and returning phone calls.
- Whether family members' expectations are realistic.

Support group meetings provide a forum for family members to speak about their experiences of working with police – from positive experiences, as well as their frustrations and disappointments.

The FFMPU team's stance is neutral, offering factual information rather than opinion about the status or progress of an investigation.

### ***What can assist?***

Working with the police may be assisted by the following:

- Family members clarifying their expectations, which may include obtaining information about operational procedures and realistic expectations.
- Designating a family representative to liaise with police, and to keep other family members informed.
- Identifying communication pathways, determining the best way to obtain ongoing information and feedback about the investigation, and alternative contact details if the OIC is not available.

## **Conflict resolution strategies**

For some family members, facing confronting and challenging situations (especially with those in positions of authority, including the police) can be difficult. People deal with this in different ways. Using conflict resolution strategies like the following may be helpful:

- Clearly define the problem and focus on needs. Consider what the problem is and externalise the problem, thus separating the problem from the person.
- Recognise common ground.
- Explore options and ways of working together.
- Formulate agreements.

## **Impact on families**

Family members can be emotionally affected at different stages of the police investigation. In the difficult situation of human remains being located, identification may take several months. Family members have identified this as a particularly stressful time for those who are close to the investigation. It can also be an upsetting reminder for family members of unrelated missing persons, of possible outcomes.

The term 'closure' is often used by service providers and in the community based on the belief that resolution of the missing person's investigation, even in circumstances where a missing person is located deceased, brings some relief to those left behind. For many family members, however, this outcome results in the worst of their fears being confirmed, while at the same time a loss of hope for the loved one's return.

Further information: *When someone is missing: making a police report and assisting the investigation* (FFMPU, 2013e).

### **Discussion questions**

- Family members of missing people are faced with difficult information as the investigation continues and their loved one remains missing. What have you found helpful in dealing with difficult information while your loved one has been missing?
- Dealing with the stress of ambiguous loss impacts people in different ways. What have you found helpful in managing the stresses that arise?



## 4. Sharing your story

### **Preface**

Family members who attend group meetings at FFMPU often express feeling overwhelmed with living with the ongoing impact of not knowing. Deciding to attend a group meeting may be made at the last minute depending on how they are feeling on the day. Attending each support group meeting is an individual decision. This is reflected also in the flexible dynamics of the group and the range of issues discussed on the day, which are very much influenced by the individual needs of those who attend.

While this particular topic focuses on 'sharing your story', group members share different aspects of their stories in different ways. A family member may share a previously-undisclosed (in the group setting) part of their story. This may prompt further reflection and sharing from other group members. This process of sharing and reflection is a primary function of the group; supporting the development of resilience, reducing isolation, and sharing strategies for living with the ongoing ambiguity of missing.

### **Sharing your story**

Those who attend FFMPU groups have indicated that sharing their story has different therapeutic benefits for them and others (FFMPU, 2013a). Pauline Boss describes the development of resilience occurring more readily in the presence of others who have experienced similar loss, and that "a sense of community" helps individuals and families heal (Boss, 2006, p.57).

Often the stories families share provide a snapshot of the different parts of their experience. They may talk about what happened, what they or others said and what they did. Sometimes stories are told and retold. This may be for a number of reasons, whether in an attempt to make sense of what has happened, to find answers, or to share with others in the hope that it helps others in their experience. For some, the (re)telling of these stories may also highlight feelings of doubt, blame, guilt and shame. The most difficult step in resolving loss is to make sense of it (Boss, 1999).

In support group meetings, sharing stories can assist families and friends of missing people to process what has happened, hear from others what resonated for them, identify aspects of their story perhaps not previously considered and gain an awareness of different aspects of themselves, previously unacknowledged. (Carey and Russell, 2003; White, 2005)

Rather than a group member being identified as the prescribed 'interviewee' to share their story, or audience to hearing and participating in the story-telling (Carey and Russell, 2003), FFMPU group members take a more active and fluid approach, moving between sharer and listener.

Participants are invited to share part of their experience with other group members reflecting on what caught their attention or resonated with them, particularly in relation to values, beliefs, hopes and dreams. Group members who have 'witnessed' the sharing of others, also reflect on connection with their own life and how the story moved them or gave another perspective into their own experience.

#### **Prompts for sharing**

- Invite group members to share an aspect of their experience of having a loved one missing.
- Focusing on a specific theme may be helpful to generate sharing and discussion
- If the client is focusing on a problem-saturated story, listen and reflect on what is important for the person such as values and beliefs underpinning the story.

NOTE: Sharing part or all of an individual's story is entirely voluntary. While group members may be hesitant to initiate such actions, they will later 'remind' facilitators if they wish to share a part of their story, and have not already done so

### Discussion questions

- What resonates for you?
- Is there a part of someone else's story that resonates with you?
- What is it about your own life experience that means this resonates with you?

### Reflection

- What was it like to hear about the group member's reflection of your story? What did you learn from their reflections about your story that you had not recognised or acknowledged before?

### Debriefing questions

- What did you find different about this way of sharing a story?
- What was it like to participate in sharing your own and hearing other stories?

## Connecting with others

The FFMPU group work program offers a place to connect with others, share and hear stories, receive support, and learn ways of living with not knowing. Group cohesion has been identified an important factor in relation to the capacity of members to develop connections, work together as a group to meet the needs of others, and relate to each other (FFMPU, 2013a).

The characteristics of a cohesive group are "warmth and comfort in the group and a sense of belongingness; they value the group and feel in turn that they are valued, accepted and supported by other members" (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005, p.55).

FFMPU support groups meetings offer families a safe and supportive environment to connect with others, to offer a space of understanding and reduce isolation. One group member described the meeting as:

*Most useful; interaction with other group members suffering loss, helps me dissipate my loss (FFMPU, 2013a, p.6).*

*[The group is] always very helpful. Sometimes things have not always applied [to me] but you still learn things afterwards. It is good to meet other people in the same situation. They understand you. I have a connection with another family; they also have a missing son. I look forward to seeing them at annual events. It is good to meet people, and it is an unspoken support. (FFMPU, 2014e, p.46)*

## **Dealing with the responses of others**

When a loved one goes missing, the impact on family members is felt individually, within family and friendship networks, and within the broader community. Family members and friends left behind can feel isolated, overwhelmed, and little understood. Living with missing can change relationships, communication with others, and understanding of family and social roles:

*People cross the road to avoid talking to me. It's not exactly dinner party conversation (FFMPU, 2014e, p.32).*

Families cannot problem-solve the loss because they do not know whether it is final or temporary.

Some of the reasons why it is so devastating...

- The frightening possibility of never really knowing what happened to the missing person, of never really being able to know if they are gone, and if they are, to say goodbye.
- The lack of understanding they can experience from family, friends, colleagues or workmates. People can say things like 'well they must be dead' or 'it's time you moved on, they obviously don't want to see you.'
- The inability to stop thinking about it, and in some cases the belief that if they were to stop, then that would mean they no longer care/or have hope.

## **Reactions to missing**

Some families talk about the difficulties they have dealing with the responses of others who may react or respond in ways that can be hurtful or distressing. These include:

- not acknowledging the missing loved one. Others may refrain from, or avoid talking about or mentioning the missing family member;
- disenfranchising the loss: not acknowledging or understanding, and disregarding the loss experienced by families;
- intrusive questioning or frequently asking for updates on the investigation; and
- offering support in a way that is perceived as unhelpful. Often friends/colleagues want to offer support but may go about this in unhelpful ways. For example, suggesting that the family member needs to let go and move on, not realising this is hurtful and dismisses the ongoing and unresolved loss being experienced.

## **Impact on families**

The experience of a family member going missing affects different members of the family of all ages, and in different ways. There are often differences in how family members respond, and what they think has happened. This may lead to disagreement or conflict. In writing about family resilience and ambiguous loss, Pauline Boss states: "Not all people attain resilience in the same way. What we hope for is that members of one couple and family have compatible views. This is not always the case, however ...[and] too much incongruence can lead to family or marital splits" (Boss, 2006, p.49).

Developing resilience as a family may mean starting with acknowledging that family members can react differently, normalising this, and recognising that there is no right or wrong way to respond.

Boss identifies the goal in working with families is to become aware of different interpretations of the ambiguous loss; to try to determine some measure of agreement within the family, but also to recognise that differing views are normal (Boss, 1999). Reactions within a family not only vary, but can change over time.

*I don't want to feel that grief, I have put that deep in me and that is where it is to stay. But my partner will go and open it up, and that is an enormous difference between us. (FFMPU, 2014e, p.32)*

## **The community response to missing**

When a loved one goes missing, the distress felt by those left behind may not be validated, recognised or talked about in the community. As family members, friends and community members struggle to know what to say, this can lead to avoidance of talking about the missing person, furthering feelings of isolation or loneliness.

*People avoid the subject. Even those who know me and know what has happened, don't say anything. Missing is like the 'elephant in the room.'* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.34)

*The community doesn't know how to react to it; they don't know what to do. They just think, I don't know what to say, I'll back off.* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.34)

Family members can feel further isolated when met with community responses that show a lack of understanding about missing. They may sometimes feel pressured to reach a conclusion about what has happened to the missing person or to accept that they are gone.

*I have no support, the family keeps telling me to move on...but how am I supposed to do that when I don't know what has happened?* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.35)

*People think that because it has been three and a half years you should be over it.* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.35)

## **The language of loss**

Different words and language are used to describe loss, and the loss associated with a missing loved one. The terms mourning and bereavement are more often used to describe the loss associated with death. Grief is a term that can be applied to other types of losses, and can be used to describe the loss associated with missing, although it is often prefaced with the adjective unresolved. Language is very personal, and what may feel right or acceptable for one person, may not suit another. One family member rejected the use of the word grief in this way:

*the problem dealing with missing is there is no grief only thoughts and hope* (FFMPU Facebook communication).

Media stories about crime and circumstances such as missing, can also focus on the concept of closure, or that the grieving process cannot begin until the truth is discovered (Bull, 2011). For many, as long as the missing continues, there is hope, which does not fit comfortably with the concept of closure.

### **Discussion questions**

- Reflect on some of the responses you have encountered as the family member/friend of a missing person. What have you found helpful? What has not been so helpful?
- Sometimes friends or acquaintances may not know how to offer support to someone when a loved one is missing. What have you found useful in letting others know how best to support you?
- How have your relationships with others changed during this period? What have you found helpful in keeping communication lines open?

## 5. Rituals and ceremonies

Rituals play a part in helping family members and friends to express their feelings and acknowledge their experience of ambiguous loss. Rituals may also help to maintain the bonds those left behind have with the missing person.

Rituals and ceremonies are opportunities for:

- acknowledging the missing person
- finding meaning in loss
- acknowledging the experience of family members and friends
- expressing feelings in families
- creating and maintaining connection with the missing person
- public recognition and remembrance of a missing loved one
- acknowledging the 'both/and' dichotomy of absence and presence in the sense that the missing person is both physically absent and psychologically present. (Boss, 2006).

Families may have their own traditions and rituals in relation to certain celebrations and/or events. These may pre-date a loved one going missing. For families it may be important to consider how these rituals continue in a way that allows the missing loved one to be included. Boss (1999) suggests that "family celebrations and rituals do not have to be discontinued just because there is an ambiguous loss, but people involved must discover what their loss means to them before they can alter family tradition" (Boss, 1999, p.122).

### **Use of rituals**

Rituals can be created or continued for important dates, and can also be incorporated into daily life.

Just as each family member or friend responds differently to the experience of missing, the use of rituals varies. There is no right or wrong way to practise a ritual as it is about what each person finds meaningful. Not everyone will have the same opinion about rituals, especially those that may hold different meanings; for example, a memorial service is not suited to everyone.

Rituals can be individual and private, or held in the company of others. It is useful to have a discussion about how each person involved feels about having a ritual, the roles people play, and each person's level of participation. It is acceptable for people to choose not to participate, if this is something with which they feel uncomfortable.

Rituals and ceremonies can include stories, symbols and metaphors that provide meaning.

Families have shared some examples of rituals and ceremonies that include:

- writing a letter to the missing person
- lighting a candle during a particular event
- holding a memorial or remembrance service
- celebrating or acknowledging the person's birthday, for example writing a card or having dinner with supportive people
- getting a tattoo in memory of the missing person. (FFMPU, 2014c)

*Rituals were important as they allowed my family and friends to come together and support one another.* (FFMPU, 2009, p.1)

Rituals and ceremonies take different forms. The FFMPU Quilt Project and National Missing Persons Week are two examples of the different ways that family members honour and connect with their missing loved ones.

## **The quilt project**

The quilt project grew out of the FFMPU Wollongong group and the young people's group 'In the Loop', expanding to include people who had attended groups in Newcastle and Queanbeyan. Family members ranging in age from 10 to 70 years, contributed to individual squares and assisted others, with some squares sewn by several generations of the one family.

The quilt squares and their accompanying stories represent relationships and continuing bonds between loved ones and the missing person, using words, symbols and metaphors. The words and images create a tangible representation and acknowledgement of the missing loved one and connection with those left behind. *A quilt for missing people: Companion book* (FFMPU, 2013) was published depicting the individual quilt squares accompanied by a story shared by family members, about the missing person and the images chosen. The completed quilt now hangs in the foyer of the Parramatta Justice Precinct Offices where FFMPU is located.

## **The Tree of Life Message Board**

The Tree of Life Message Board was launched by the Attorney General on 26 September 2015, at an event to commemorate 15 years of FFMPU's operation. The Message Board brings together messages from family members who were present at the event to mark the start of National Missing Persons Week 2014, at NSW Police Headquarters. Other family members who were unable to attend also contributed squares with handwritten messages to and about their missing loved ones.

While the original intention, at the outset of the 'project', was to create another quilt, the family members who took responsibility for its final compilation, produced the Tree of Life Message Board.

It is currently on loan and hanging in a public library in regional NSW. The Message Board formed the centrepiece for a National Missing Persons Week 2016 event in regional NSW. Like the Families and Friends of Missing People Quilt, the Message Board provided the opportunity for ritual, recognition and raising awareness of missing loved ones and those who are left behind.

## ***National Missing Persons Week***

National Missing Persons Week is an annual event coordinated by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), Australian Federal Police. It aims to raise awareness of missing persons' issues and reduce the incidence of missing persons in Australia through awareness and prevention campaigns via national and state-based media (NMPCC, 2015). Each year a theme is chosen for the awareness raising campaign, including focusing on young people, dementia, mental health and the impact of missing persons on those left behind.

The national campaign is launched in an Australian capital city each year, with state-based campaigns occurring across the country. In NSW the event that marks the start of the week has been held at NSW Police Headquarters, attended by guest speakers, state police, families and friends of missing people, and FFMPU staff. Attending such events provides family members with the opportunity to honour and remember their loved one, connect with others, meet people who work in the missing persons' sector, and acknowledge missing people in the community.

### Discussion questions

- What rituals or ceremonies have you created for yourself or your family? Who takes part in the ritual? What are their roles?
- How do family rituals and traditions include your missing loved one?
- What has been difficult or challenging about creating the ritual or ceremony (for example, conflicting views from family members).
- Consider what kinds of rituals this group has. What has been your experience of participating in these rituals?





## 6. Raising community awareness

### ***Community awareness about missing persons' issues***

A number of group members over time have expressed interest in raising community awareness about missing persons' issues. As a unit, FFMPU does this in a number of ways; however, it is also important for family members and friends to have the opportunity to participate in raising awareness about these issues as individuals or part of a group.

Families and friends comment that being able to do something for their loved one, or to help produce something that may assist others in a similar situation can be therapeutic in itself. Participating in community awareness and advocacy activities can also give families a sense of achievement, empowerment, hope, and connection with others.

### ***Forms of community awareness raising and advocacy***

Family members have raised awareness through their contributions to *Missing People: A guide for family members and service providers* (FFMPU, 2014e); and their participation in the 'Quilt for missing people' and the accompanying *A quilt for missing people: Companion book* (FFMPU, 2013). Young people contributed to *In the Loop: Young people talking about missing* (FFMPU, 2013c). Others have presented community development sessions on missing persons' issues for community groups and service providers.

Raising awareness about missing persons' issues can also include:

- education to members of the community
- writing to members of parliament to raise an issue or draw attention to a concern
- participation in events such as National Missing Persons Week
- using different forms of media to raise issues or enhance education.

These activities can be undertaken individually or as part of a group. Family members have also participated in the ongoing training of police students, presenting a powerful insight about missing persons' issues and the impact on those left behind.

It is important to remember that FFMPU was established in 2000 following extensive lobbying by family members and agencies within the missing persons' sector, out of the recognition of a need for a specialist service to support those left behind. Advocacy has therefore played a vital role in the development of the unit, and further advocacy by family members is encouraged, to increase understanding and awareness, and to ensure better support for those left behind.



## 7. Mindfulness, meditation and self-care

Having a loved one missing has been described as the most stressful of issues. For many families it is a traumatic experience which can result in hypervigilance, difficulties with concentration, poor sleep and eating, and feelings of depression and anxiety. For these reasons, it is important that those left behind find ways to begin to take care of themselves. Each person's experience of coping is different, and each finds their own way and, hopefully, what works for them.

The Self-Care Assessment Worksheet (Saakvitne and Pearlman, 1996) may help group members to recognise and acknowledge what they are currently doing to care for themselves and learn new strategies to look after themselves (see Appendix 1).

One way of managing stressful and difficult situations is through mindfulness, meditation or relaxation practices. These can be used to help manage symptoms of anxiety, orient the person to stay in the present (the 'here and now'), help improve concentration, and reduce stress levels.

This topic, like others, can be run as a single session or an exercise can be incorporated as part of any support group meeting.

### **Key points**

- It is important to note that some may find relaxation and meditation exercises difficult, so group members should be given the opportunity to participate at a level at which they feel comfortable. For those who choose not to participate, the facilitators may ask them to sit quietly in the room during the exercise.
- Another important point is being aware that each person has a different window of tolerance where their autonomic nervous system can become hypo-aroused (para-sympathetic nervous system) and hyper-aroused (sympathetic nervous system). Put simply, some people may be triggered or become distressed during the exercise, and should be supported to recognise and set their own limits around ongoing participation in such exercises.
- Everyone has different ways of relaxing. Some may be content being with their own thoughts or using visual imagery, while some may find it easier to have external stimuli or use physical activity such as walking, to assist them towards a relaxed state.
- If choosing to practise a mindfulness exercise, participants will need to be familiarised to the concept, its use and benefits. In particular, the idea that being mindful or practising mindfulness takes practice; and that mindfulness is about being in the present moment, experiencing the present without judgement, attaching or 'hanging on' to thoughts and images that may arise and letting these thoughts and images go or drift away.
- It is important that at the end of each exercise, the group is reoriented to the present. This can be done by gradually bringing their awareness back to the present moment, or doing a grounding exercise (Rigoni, 2009). For the purposes of the group, these exercises will be relatively short.
- After the exercise it is not uncommon for some group members to express the positive impact the exercise has had. Others may not share this positive experience. For this reason, it is important to normalise that the exercises may not suit all, and to normalise a range of responses.

## Discussion points

- Prior to the relaxation exercise, facilitators may want to ask the group what activities and exercise they currently practise to relax, or that helps to improve sleep, concentration, low mood and feelings of stress;
- The *Self-Care Assessment Worksheet* can be used to obtain more information about group members:
- what they are currently doing 'well' and what helps to maintain this;
- what they hope to improve, and what they may need to do this; and

For further information: See also *Taking care of yourself when someone goes missing* (FFMPU, 2014f)

## Discussion questions

- How was it for you to do this exercise? What did you notice about being in the present moment?
- How was the present moment you experienced different to other times when you are not practising mindfulness? How can you incorporate mindfulness in your day-to-day-life?

## Breathing exercise – can be used as a mindfulness practice

Deep breathing can be an important skill to learn. Many people do not breathe “properly”. Natural breathing involves your diaphragm, a large muscle in your abdomen. When you breathe in, your belly should expand. When you breathe out, your belly should fall. Over time, people forget how to breathe this way and instead use their chest and shoulders. This causes short, shallow breaths, which can increase stress and anxiety.

Fortunately, it is never too late to “re-learn” how to breathe, and to use breathing as part of a stress-management strategy. Practise the simple exercise below to improve your breathing.

**Difficulty:** Easy

**Time required:** 10 minutes

1. Find a comfortable position either lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting down, make sure that you keep your back straight and release the tension in your shoulders. Let them drop.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.
4. Take a few breaths as you normally would. Does your belly rise and fall with every inhalation and exhalation? If you can answer “yes,” that is good. This is the natural way of breathing. If your belly stays still but your chest rises and falls with every breath, practise breathing by only allowing your belly to rise and fall with your breathing.
5. Continue to take deep breaths, concentrating on only moving your belly.
6. Continue as long as you choose.

## Tips

1. It can take some time to re-learn how to breathe. The more you practise, the easier it becomes. Take some time each day to practise this exercise. You can do it anywhere.
2. Initially, try to practise this exercise at a time when you are already relaxed. This will make it easier to begin.
3. If you are having trouble taking deep breaths, try breathing in through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Also, slowly count to five as you inhale and exhale slowly (Excerpt from Tull, 2009).

Mindfulness can be a powerful stress reliever. It takes some practice, but any time spent on it is a positive step. There are many online references and links to relaxation and mindfulness exercises that may be useful in a group setting.



## 8. Children, young people and grief

### ***Children and loss***

Growing up involves dealing with change, losses and gains, and the challenge for children, young people and their carers is how to deal with these.

For children these losses may include losing a family member or friend, losing a pet, starting childcare or school, changing classes and teachers, moving house, separation or divorce of parents.

The support children and young people receive, how early losses are dealt with, the conversations that happen in families, and what children observe, are all important in determining how children and young people deal with the losses experienced.

### ***Children and grief***

Children and young people grieve individually and in different ways to adults.

- Their grief can appear less direct than that of an adult.
- Grief may be expressed in ways that do not appear related to a loss. Their behaviour may be challenging, demanding and difficult as they struggle to find out and understand what's happening. They may be looking for reassurance, closeness, comfort and support.
- Children move in and out of grief. They could seem fine one day and another day they may not seem to be managing so well.
- They may behave in ways that seem 'out of character' – they may be distant or clingy, quiet or noisy, attention-seeking or withdrawn.

Important factors which impact on behaviour and expression of grief are age, emotional maturity, connection to the person or circumstances of the loss.

### ***Children, young people and ambiguous loss***

How to care for, include and talk to children when a loved one is missing is often a cause for concern and a topic of conversation in support group meetings.

Children also experience ambiguous loss, including the experience of a parent, sibling, other family member or someone they care about going missing. Other ambiguous losses may include:

- parental separation or family break up
- loss of friendship
- disability or illness
- moving house or changing school.

### ***How children show their grief***

Young children often do not have the words to talk about feelings, as adults do. They may show their in appetite, destructive behaviour, regression or pseudo-mature behaviour, aggression, angry or repetitive play, emotional instability, and difficulties concentrating. Children can also show their grief by 'switching off' and acting as if they are unaffected by what has happened, by running away, or school avoidance.

Times of loss are stressful for children because:

- the adults who love them may not be as emotionally or physically available to support them, especially if the adults are understandably distressed themselves
- the situation is outside their normal routine and the usual routine is disrupted

- those around them may behave differently, and may be distracted from what is happening to the child
- they are not sure of how to respond or behave
- when a loss, such as missing, occurs, the child may fear it will happen to someone else they care about.

### **How adults can help**

- Acknowledge the event and painful emotions.
- Model appropriate behaviour by being honest with feelings, thus allowing the child to express their feelings.
- Encourage the child to talk about their feelings and worries before they feel out of control or too overwhelming.
- Encourage discussion of fears and emotions and listen carefully for verbal and non-verbal cues about child's understanding.
- Keep conversations and language simple and non-judgemental.
- Allow child to question, express doubts and have their own opinion.
- If you feel unable to answer a child's questions, let them know that there are people who are trained who can assist and support them.
- Let your child know that asking for help and support is a sign of courage not weakness.
- Be honest and open in talking about what has happened, bearing in mind the need for sensitivity in regard to the language used.
- Be mindful of the delicate balance of giving enough versus too much information.
- Finally, if you don't know the answer to a question, it is okay to say so.

### **Discussion questions**

- How do you think the children and young people in your life understand/comprehend what has happened?
- What conversations do you have with your children about the missing person?
- What has helped/hindered you in talking with your children since your/their loved one went missing?



## 9. Resilience and hope

### **Resilience**

Resilience can be described as the “ability to bounce back from negative events by using positive emotions to cope” (Tugade, Frederickson & Barnett, 2004). In the context of ambiguous loss, Boss (2006) describes resilience as the “ability to stretch (like elastic), or flex (like a suspension bridge) in response to the pressures and strains of life...[including] the normative stress from everyday hassles as well as the expected family transitions of entries and exits (births and deaths) across the life span.” (2006, p.48).

Family resilience is described as “living comfortably and without conflict” (p.49) with unanswered questions. Family members sometimes hold different views or opinions about what has happened to the missing person, and also different perceptions of who is included in the psychological notion of family. Developing an understanding and tolerance for difference within the family is an important part of building resilience as a family system.

### **Ambiguous loss and resilience**

When a loss is ambiguous, resilience comes from the ability to tolerate the unknown, and the acceptance that what is not known may never be known (Boss, 2007). The process of developing resilience to cope with the impact of an ambiguous loss such as missing, takes time. People attain resilience in different ways.

Ambiguous loss is identified as a relational disorder requiring a relational and resilience based approach, due to the disruption of human relationships. The development of resilience occurs more easily with a relational approach, in the presence of those who have had similar losses. Support group meetings allow individuals the opportunity to meet others in similar circumstances, giving people the space they need to share their story. By bringing people together and having these conversations, there is room to consider varying aspects of resilience.

To find a way of moving forward and possibly even grow from the traumatising impact of ambiguous loss requires immense resilience. Many people are able to achieve this in time. The challenge for them and for those who support them is to be patient. This can be difficult when answers and solutions are what is sought but may not eventuate.

“Resilience is a process that takes time” (Boss, 2006, p.47).

Group meetings support the development of resilience in the presence of others who have their own experience of missing. These meetings, combined with other FFMPU events, activities and publications provide a supportive and empowering platform to foster resilience.

### **Working with hope**

FFMPU counsellors recognise the importance of retaining hope, or developing a new sense of hope, as a fundamental part of living with missing. Boss (2006) describes discovering hope as the goal of therapy, the hope that life can continue despite the loss of the missing person, and emerge from the realisation of being able to experience happiness again. Service providers sometimes need to be reminded to allow family members to continue to feel hopeful. A family member expressed it in this way – *there is no body, so we can't give up hope*. Family members are caught between knowing and not knowing, hoping and fearing.

Hope means different things to different people. It can shift and change over time, and may relate to the loved one being located and returning safely, or to being located alive and well, or even to finding answers to some of the many questions that remain. Boss (2006) describes hope “as a positive belief with the expectation of fulfilment...it is believing that suffering can stop and that comfort is possible in the future” (p.177).

Hope is individual to each person affected by missing. Hope is described by one client as *what gets them out of bed in the morning* (FFMPU, 2014e).

Other reflections of hope (FFMPU, 2014e, p.57) include:

*The human mind will not let go of the last thread of hope, even if it tries.*

*As the years pass and the doubts set in, as they do from time to time, hope still remains.*

*Hope is really important for me. There is a part of you that has to hang on, however small it might be.*

For some, hope can hinder the development of resilience when people experiencing ambiguous loss continue to seek closure and definitive answers. This is particularly true when families continue to long for life as it used to be.

### **Professional resilience**

Counsellors and practitioners must also be mindful of professional resilience. There is an obligation for self-care, a very important aspect of working with ambiguous loss. It is difficult to have conversations with family members and other loved ones about taking care of themselves, if the counsellor or facilitator is not mindful of his/her own self-care.

Regular professional supervision, debriefing and a healthy work/life balance are important factors to enable continuing to work effectively with a wide range of clients.

It is important to have ongoing conversations about the impact of such work, as well as implementing appropriate strategies for managing this.

#### **Discussion questions**

- What does resilience mean to you individually, and as a family?
- In what ways have you noticed that you have developed resilience to cope with the uncertainty of missing? What have you found helpful?
- What does hope mean for you?
- Have you noticed changes in the way you feel hopeful during the time your loved one has been missing?

## 10. Dealing with difficult information

The trauma of living with ambiguous loss “wears people out” (Boss, 2006, p.36). The physical and mental exhaustion that can result from a lack of control, as well as dealing with the unknown, can erode one’s sense of mastery (Boss, 2006). Family members can feel overwhelmed as a result of ‘not knowing’ what has happened to their loved one, and may feel confronted by imagined outcomes.

The unpredictability of missing, and of a loved one remaining missing, leaves families in a reactive position. The family may feel tremendous guilt and be unable to make decisions, fearing that the wrong choice will have negative consequences. Family members often differ in the opinions they hold about what has happened, and may withdraw from each other, further isolating themselves (Betz & Thorngren, 2006).

Overwhelmed family members can struggle emotionally and cognitively to deal with the search and ongoing challenge of dealing with difficult information, as the search continues, and if the loved one remains missing. Numbed and traumatised by the shock of the loss, the cognitive effects of stress make clarity of thinking difficult. It can also be difficult to remember information and details. In the early stages of the investigation loved ones are encouraged to write important information in a journal.

Family members are particularly vulnerable when presented with further distressing information. This can take many forms through the investigative process. A possible sighting not being confirmed; discovering that there has been no activity on a loved one’s bank account; contact with the Coroner’s Court; or coping with the findings of an inquest or other court process, are a few examples of the difficult information with which family members have to contend.

Family members can sometimes be exposed to difficult information via the media. The media may focus on particular aspects of the investigation or reveal personal information about their family member of which they were unaware. Media coverage of other missing persons’ cases can also be confronting for family members who may empathise with the family about whom the media is reporting.

The brief of evidence prepared for the Coroner, and available for family members to access when the investigation is complete, can contain distressing information. Sometimes the family is hearing/reading this information for the first time. Family members may request to receive the brief of evidence before the inquest, giving them time to prepare themselves as much as possible, for the inquest.

Different feelings can be triggered in dealing with distressing or difficult information – helplessness, confusion, frustration, anger, despair to name a few. Acknowledging and validating feelings is an important part of understanding that these are normal reactions to abnormal circumstances.

### ***Cognitive effects of stress***

The high degree of stress associated with ambiguous loss results in significant cognitive responses that in turn affect the capacity to deal with further stress. Cognitive signs of stress include (Bressert, 2006):

- mental slowness
- confusion
- general negative attitudes or thoughts
- constant worry
- your mind racing at times
- difficulty concentrating

- forgetfulness
- difficulty thinking in a logical sequence
- the sense that life is overwhelming
- difficulties problem-solving.

### ***Taking care of yourself***

Accessing support can help to reduce some of the impacts of the ongoing stress of living with missing, particularly at times of dealing with difficult information. Support may include talking to family members or friends, support and counselling from FFMPU, seeking referral to a counsellor, accessing or attending an FFMPU support group meeting.

Having someone to talk to can help family members feel less alone, and provide the opportunity to debrief about difficult information or challenging situations. Each person's experience and needs differ, and one should never assume that individual family members or other loved ones have the same support needs.

Acknowledging your feelings, trying to maintain healthy sleep, eating and exercise patterns, and accessing support and information are some of the things that can help family members cope with the ongoing stress of missing and dealing with difficult information along the way.

Linking into FFMPU support group meetings can provide a place to talk and connect with others who are experiencing similar things. Many family members report that support group meetings offer the only opportunity they have to express their feelings in a safe and non-judgemental way, and without having to censor themselves in any way.

### ***How much we share with others: Who needs to know what?***

Another way of taking care of yourself is by choosing who to share information with and how. Family members sometimes talk about the difficulty of dealing with the responses of others who do not acknowledge what happened, avoid talking about the missing person, or who expect those left behind to 'move on'. Family members can also be asked intrusive questions, or for frequent updates about the investigation process which can be distressing (see also section 4).

It is important for family members to remain mindful that they are able to choose how much information to share with others. They have a right to privacy and the right not to provide details they do not feel comfortable sharing. Family members often become aware that as time goes on and if their loved one remains missing, relationships can be strained and others strengthened. Family members can find it helpful to discuss with friends or colleagues how they can best be supported; and do this frequently in support group meetings.

#### **Discussion questions**

- What strategies have you used to deal with difficult information?
- What self-care strategies do you use since your loved one went missing?
- Who in your life are you able to share your story with?
- What type of situations/scenarios enable you to discuss your current circumstances?

## 11. Relationships

### ***Ambiguous loss and relationships***

Boss (2006) describes ambiguous loss as a relational disorder, and that the development of resilience occurs more easily with a relational approach, in the presence of others who have experienced similar losses. Boss asserts that “ambiguity coupled with loss creates a powerful barrier to coping and grieving and leads to symptoms such as depression and relational conflict that can erode human relationships” (2006, p.1).

Viewed in this way ambiguous loss is not an individual pathology. It follows, then, that family and community-based interventions, as opposed to individual therapy, will be resisted less and thus more effective. It should come as no surprise that when loved ones disappear, the remaining family members yearn to stay together and may resist therapy if it means more separation. Separating family members for individual therapy may only add to the trauma of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006, p.xviii).

### ***Psychological family***

The psychological family can be understood as a ‘private perception’ of who each family member perceives to be part of home and family, and is “an active and affective bond that helps people live with loss and trauma in the present” (Boss, 2006, p.26).

Recognising and affirming the psychological family, and how perceptions may differ between family members, is an important part of moving forward in the context of ambiguous loss. In the very early stages of counselling, it is important to have a conversation about who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ of the psychological family. In having this conversation it is possible to understand and recognise the relationships that are considered important to individual family members.

Boss identifies that when a family member is missing, relationships with the missing loved one need to be redefined, along with family roles, rules and rituals (Boss, 1999). When a family member goes missing, this can result in a loss of individual and family identity, disrupting ideas about who they are, role expectations, and leading to identity confusion.

### ***Reconstructing relational identity***

Boss observed that “family members facing a painful loss cannot deny forever that something has changed. Eventually they are pressured...to define the status of the missing person” (1999, p.93).

Boss (2006) identifies the following tasks to revise identity after ambiguous loss:

1. Define family boundaries
2. Select major developmental themes
3. Develop shared values and views

### ***Changing relationships***

When a family member goes missing and remains missing, the family not only adapts to their changed structure as a family, but relationships with the missing person will also continue to evolve.

*This can be seen through the mother of a missing teenager acknowledging her daughter's 40th birthday, twenty-four years after her disappearance; or in the ways that family members keep their missing person present at significant events and milestones, and how this may change over time.*  
(FFMPU group input)

As missing continues, relationships within the family and connected to the missing person change. Family members not only talk about changing family dynamics, but also the changes in relationships with other people who are important in the missing person's life (for example partners, friends, work colleagues). Family members may initially feel some pressure to maintain these relationships, but over time, some of these relationships may come to an end, while others will strengthen.

Relationships between family members may also change as each family member tries to deal with their individual feelings of loss and grief. For some families, they may feel that relationships have become stronger and bring the family closer together:

*no one else can understand in the same way* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.32).

Other relationships may feel less close:

*It changes the dynamics of existing friendships and relationships. The people I thought were my closest friends were not able to understand and be there for me emotionally,'* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.33).

*When people ask me how I'm going and show some real understanding ...that's why I've befriended certain people since [my son] went missing... people who have empathy for our situation, whereas friends who ask a million questions are harder to deal with and I don't always want to talk about it; it brings discomfort'* (FFMPU, 2014e, p.33).

### **Whole of family response**

When a family member goes missing, the impact is felt throughout the family, regardless of age. In 2005 and 2012, FFMPU hosted 'round table' discussions for siblings, and for young people with missing loved ones. They shared their experiences and offered insights into their needs, to better inform future interventions.

Siblings and young people identified a number of common experiences, including: challenges of responding to parents and others in the community; finding their own support needs overlooked; ongoing grief and loss; experiencing 'sibling guilt' at being unable to prevent their loved one leaving or to locate them; the need for escape/time out; and learning to rebuild their own lives.

Siblings and young people also identified ways in which the system might better respond to their needs. These included recognising and providing better support; educating others about the impact of missing on siblings and young people; information for families and friends about how the service system works; accessible resources; opportunities to talk with others of similar ages and relationship affected by missing. Many of these issues were addressed in 'In the Loop' group meetings.

#### **Discussion questions**

- When a family member goes missing, relationships within the family can change significantly, becoming closer or more distant. How have you noticed relationships within your family have changed?
- What have you found helpful in dealing with changing relationships within the family?
- Reflect on how your relationship with your missing loved one has changed over time. What has changed, and what has stayed the same?

## 12. Spirituality and meaning

### ***Grief, loss and meaning***

Grieving is a process of reconstructing a world of meaning challenged by loss (Neimeyer, 2010).

How people find meaning varies. Meaning may be derived through culture, spirituality, philosophy or religion. Family members often identify significant changes in their belief systems and feelings of spirituality as they live with the loss of their missing person. Some will identify that their spiritual and religious beliefs are strengthened, while others will reflect on the ways their beliefs have been shaken or lost.

“Without meaning there is no hope” (Boss, 2006, p.90)

### ***Meaning and spirituality***

- Spirituality means different things to different people. It is a very individual experience, just as people hold different values and beliefs. Some have very clear ideas about what spirituality means for them. For others, it may be a journey of self-discovery and may change over time.
- Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives.
- In general, it includes a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves, and it typically involves a search for meaning in life. As such, it is a universal human experience—something that touches us all. (University of Minnesota, 2013)

Support group meetings continue to provide a forum to raise and discuss challenges and changes in spirituality and meaning while living with the grief and loss of a missing loved one.

Emotions and beliefs can be powerful and powerfully expressed. As with many of the impacts of the loss of a missing person, there is no absolute right or wrong way to express or experience spirituality and make meaning of a loved one being missing.

The process of finding meaning takes time, and can be assisted through the following:

- naming the problem as ambiguity
- dialectical thinking, recognising that a missing person can be both present (psychologically) and absent (physically)
- exploring and connecting with spirituality and religion in a way that feels right for the individual
- engaging in small good works or some small positive act
- creating or continuing rituals to find meaning and acknowledge the missing person
- sacrifice for a greater good or love – finding purpose or meaning in moving forward to honour a loved one
- hope, finding hope for the future. (Boss, 2006)

### **Discussion questions**

- What does spirituality mean to you? How do you express that?
- Has your spirituality/belief system changed since your loved one was reported missing?
- Is finding meaning linked to your spirituality in any way?





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## Appendix 1: Self-Care Assessment Worksheet

This assessment tool provides an overview of effective strategies to maintain self-care (Saakvitne and Pearlman, 1996). After completing the full assessment, choose one item from each area that you will actively work to improve.

Using the scale below, rate the following areas in terms of frequency:

5 = Frequently

4 = Occasionally

3 = Rarely

2 = Never

1 = It never occurred to me

Source: Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization. Saakvitne, Pearlman & Staff of TSI/CAAP (Norton, 1996)

### Physical Self-Care

- Eat regularly (e.g. breakfast, lunch and dinner)
- Eat healthy
- Exercise
- Get regular medical care for prevention
- Get medical care when needed
- Take time off when needed
- Get massages
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing, or do some other physical activity that is fun
- Take time to be sexual—with yourself, with a partner
- Get enough sleep
- Wear clothes you like
- Take vacations
- Take day trips or mini-vacations
- Make time away from telephones
- Other .....

## Psychological Self-Care

- Make time for self-reflection
- Have your own personal psychotherapy
- Write in a journal
- Read literature that is unrelated to work
- Do something at which you are not expert or in charge
- Decrease stress in your life
- Let others know different aspects of you
- Notice your inner experience—listen to your thoughts, judgments, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings
- Engage your intelligence in a new area (e.g. go to an art museum, history exhibit, sports event, auction, theater performance)
- Practice receiving from others
- Be curious
- Say “no” to extra responsibilities sometimes
- Other .....

## Emotional Self-Care

- Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- Stay in contact with important people in your life
- Give yourself affirmations, praise yourself
- Love yourself
- Re-read favorite books, re-view favorite movies
- Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out
- Allow yourself to cry
- Find things that make you laugh
- Express your outrage in social action, letters and donations, marches, protests
- Other .....

## Spiritual Self-Care

- Make time for reflection
- Spend time with nature
- Find a spiritual connection or community
- Be open to inspiration
- Cherish your optimism and hope
- Be aware of nonmaterial aspects of life
- Try at times not to be in charge or the expert
- Be open to not knowing
- Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- Meditate
- Pray
- Sing
- Spend time with children
- Have experiences of awe
- Contribute to causes in which you believe
- Read inspirational literature (talks, music, etc.)
- Other .....

## Workplace or Professional Self-Care

- Take a break during the workday (e.g. lunch)
- Take time to chat with co-workers
- Make quiet time to complete tasks
- Identify projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding
- Set limits with your clients and colleagues
- Balance your caseload so that no one day or part of a day is “too much”
- Arrange your work space so it is comfortable and comforting
- Get regular supervision or consultation
- Negotiate for your needs (benefits, pay raise)
- Have a peer support group
- Develop a non-trauma area of professional interest
- Other .....

## Balance

- Strive for balance within your work-life and workday
- Strive for balance among work, family, relationships, play and rest



