

Bereavement and missing persons

Missing persons in NSW

Approximately 35,000 people are reported missing every year in Australia. In 2008 over 11,000 missing persons reports were lodged with 83 individuals located deceased. Almost one-third of these located reports have concerns regarding the missing persons mental health within the event summary.¹

The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) within the Attorney General's Department of NSW provides crisis and ongoing support to those residing in NSW with a loved one missing, or to those individuals where the missing person was last seen in NSW.

What are the challenges in providing support to bereaved families of missing persons?

Families have shared with FFMPU that service providers tend to struggle with the ambiguous nature of missing. In the national counselling framework 'Supporting those who are left behind' families felt that professionals wanted them to

"... 'accept' their loss or decide that, on a balance of probabilities, a loved one may not return."

From the Unit's experience it appears that the majority of families need absolute proof

'before they concede that their loss is permanent'.

The counseling framework indicates that

".... when a long-term missing person is located deceased families begin a new process of coping and living with trauma. The finality of the location of remains, or the confirmation of DNA testing, tells a family that their glimmer of hope, that the missing person will return alive and well, has been extinguished. It is from this point on that some begin the bereavement process, not before."²

When families reach out for support following news of bereavement, the residue from missing persons experience can impact on the ways in which they cope with their loss. They may have been waiting

years for an answer, they may have a protracted history in working with law enforcement or they may have developed a tolerance for the ambiguity they experience as those left behind when someone is missing.

What might be the differences in the presentation of bereaved family and friends of missing people?

Each case is unique however in FFMPU's experience families may present in the following ways:

- Challenges in speaking about the deceased person. Some families of missing people vary the tenses they use from s/he 'was' to s/he 'is' to s/he 'might be'.
- Disbelief that the remains are that of the missing person, even after positive identification.
- The lack of clarity around the way the person may have died (even after locating the person, providing the family with a cause of death may be difficult).
- Concern about media interest as some families may receive media attention during the time the person was missing.³
- Families may be confused about the way they thought they would have responded to the news of a death as opposed to the way they actually responded.
- Concerns about the relationships developed with other families of missing persons and what their sad news may mean for others.
- Challenges in responding to the different feelings around the bereavement such as relief or anger at the missing person, misplaced responsibility, and sadness at not being able to protect the missing person during their last moments. Many families talk about their anxiety during bad weather and not being able to shield the missing person from the elements.
- A feeling of emptiness after expending years of energy on searching and defining themselves as families of missing people.

Where can I get further information?

In receiving a referral regarding the bereavement of a family member of a missing person you may wish to clarify with the client if they have had involvement with FFMPU during the course of the investigation.

If the family has had contact with the Unit, it might be useful for both agencies to co-support the family with their transition from having a missing person to having a deceased loved one.

If the family has not had contact with FFMPU, the Unit can provide clinical support to counsellors engaging with families of missing persons. The service provider may wish to discuss the challenges of a case or explore the complexity of an ambiguous loss and a family's ability to function during their time of bereavement.

For further information please contact the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit on:

Phone: [1800 227 772](tel:1800227772)

Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov

Web: www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

References

- 1 NSW Police data.
- 2 National Missing Persons Coordination Centre 2007. Supporting those who are left behind – A counselling framework to support families of missing persons. Canberra: Australian Federal Police.
- 3 FFMPU can assist clients of the service by circulating a press release requesting privacy.

Contact details

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

Phone (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • **National Relay Service** 1800 555 677

Facebook www.facebook.com/missing.501 • **Email** ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

© State of New South Wales through Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, Department of Justice, June 2009. This work may be freely reproduced for personal, educational and government purposes. Permission must be received from the Department for all other uses.

Alternative formats of this information are available.

This document has been prepared by Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit for general information purposes.

(FMP • 06/2009)