

Developing resilience when someone is missing: Two individual perspectives

In April 2009 the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) hosted a forum to provide practical and emotional support to families and friends of missing persons. At this forum, two family members shared with the group their personal perspectives on resilience in the aftermath of their sons going missing. The ideas and tips of these parents are summarised below.

The mother of a missing son shared the ways she had developed resilience since her son disappeared. She spoke of the following:

1. Counselling Support

I accessed the NSW Department of Justice Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit. They helped me understand and learn to live with unresolved grief.

2. My workplace

I accessed the Employee Assistance Program

- I accessed a counsellor.
- I learnt how to help my manager learn how to support me.
- I found that being able to come to the workplace, and having that normality, was helpful and knowing that I didn't have to talk if I didn't want to.

3. I documented the process of 'missing'

- I catalogued the disappearance and the search.
- It assisted me to maintain a level of control.

4. I acknowledged the importance of rituals

- Rituals were important as they allowed my family and friends to come together and support one another.
- The rituals were not linked to any church or religion ("but having said this religion does not often have rituals for missing anyway!")
- These are some of the rituals we have held:

- My son's friends are from the arts community so we were able to be creative in our planning of an event.
- We started with picnics creating a space to come together to acknowledge what had happened.
- We organised a film festival of Ash's acting and film works.
- We raised money and donated this to Tropfest Jnr for an award for an 'up and coming' artist.
- We were able to include a prevention message for young people at the festival asking them to talk to a trusted friend if they were thinking of going missing.

5. Blogs

A friend of mine set up a blog to update people on the search; it also gave us a way to communicate with Ashley.

6. I thought about how I could change the system for others

I had input into advocacy issues regarding missing persons by:

- providing feedback on the process of missing, for example the policing process at local, state and federal levels and how it has been fragmented.
- I also had the opportunity to provide feedback on improving the sector and making it less difficult for others.

7. Relying on my professional expertise

I used my professional skills, as I work as a health promotions officer with a government health service.

8. I have had input into the development of resources:

- Input into the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit forum.
- Input into counselling packages and fact sheets.
- In my work place I am now having input into the prevention of mental illness for young people through health and lifestyle programs.

9. I have an active, healthy lifestyle

- I am physically active – I cycle, walk, lift weights (research has proved that lifting weights can help in stabilising your mood) and I eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep and limit my alcohol intake.

10. I have learnt new skills

- I have learnt to meditate. I practice Raj Yoga and open eye meditation.
- I have learnt to clear my mind, still my thoughts and focus on positive thoughts.
- I value myself!
- I have compassion for life and for others through a loving heart.

11. I focused on the life skills I already had

I acknowledged that I had a high level of resilience to start with so with that I focused on my strong family upbringing and my broad friend base.

I also acknowledged that I had faced many life challenges and seen that I could 'bounce back' before.

12. I can guide others

- Others often don't know how to support you so I found I was often supporting other people and this helped, in turn, to support me.
- I acknowledged other people's relationships with my son and the importance of them and how the loss was affecting them.
- I let people know that 'missing' doesn't come with an instruction manual and that there are no rules. You can just make them up collectively to build resilience in getting each other through.

The father of a missing son shared the ways he had developed his resilience since his son disappeared.

Families require resilience at many stages on the missing persons pathway.

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

I've chosen just three references from the address I give to cadets at the NSW Police College at Goulburn:

- It's important to recognise that everyone reacts differently to the trauma of someone you care about going missing and that the reaction is experienced at different levels. One needs to cope as an individual, looking after yourself and your own needs in response to a family member going missing. Resilience is tested in your relationship with those closest to you and there needs to be an acknowledgement that you're each responding differently. On a broader level the challenge is to deal with this crisis in your workplace, social group and with extended family.
- Resilience is particularly tested when the coronial process is instigated. There are many aspects to deal with: liaison with police, the challenge of dealing with the police brief that may contain inaccuracies and surprises, decisions about who attends the inquest and what contribution you and the family make and, above all, coping with the dreadful finality of the pronouncement that your loved family member is deceased.
- Resilience can be celebrated within a family. After almost six years our family was ready for a ceremony or commemoration. This took place just in the backyard where we told each other what Ian's life and disappearance had meant to us, planted a tree and hung some wind chimes, listened to a song from Ian's sister about his going missing and finished by sharing humorous anecdotes from his life.
- In summary the experience suggests that there is no single way to respond and no "right" or "wrong" reaction because there are so many factors which impact on your capacity to be resilient, as an individual, with those closest to you or in the broader social context.