

## Information for young people when a loved one is missing

When someone we know or love goes missing the feelings can be frightening, confusing and overwhelming.

It can be hard to think about anything else. The thought of the person not being found safe and well can be too frightening to even think about.

You may not be aware of what's happening at first. This can be for all sorts of reasons:

- The adults don't know what to say or how to say it.
- They don't want to worry or upset you.
- They may be hoping the person returns before they need to worry you.
- They find it difficult to tell someone else when they don't know what's happening themselves.
- They might think you're too young to be told.
- They are used to being able to provide answers and sometimes there are no answers when someone is missing.

### What do I tell others? How do I answer their questions?

When a loved one is missing lots of things are unclear or unknown so it can be difficult to explain what's happening. It can be really difficult to talk about your loved one being missing and you may worry about being unable to control your emotions.

You can always find someone to listen: a parent or other relative, a friend, teacher, year advisor or counsellor.

There may be other people who make you feel uncomfortable, or respond in a way that disappoints or upsets you. This is usually because they don't know what to say.

Here are some suggestions:

- Keep it very simple. Talking about a missing loved one is really hard to do.
- If there are people who you think need to know, talk to someone you trust about how you might tell them.

- It's better to start with the truth. If you hide the truth you have to hide how you are feeling.
- Expressing your feelings is important. You can do this by talking, or keeping a diary, or drawing a picture.
- Write down any questions you have. This will help you remember them when you want to ask about what is happening.

### Remember:

- It's not your fault that someone you love is missing.
- Don't be afraid to ask the adults around you for information about the investigation and what is happening. It is better to hear the truth than fill in the gaps by guessing or imagining what might have happened.
- It's all right to say *"we don't know where he/she is."*
- You don't have to tell everyone. It's all right to say, *"I don't feel like talking about it."*

### For the adults:

- Keep your explanation simple and truthful. Stick to the information that's known.
- It's all right to say *"I don't know"* if you really don't know.
- Don't make things up in an attempt to be reassuring for the young person or try to guess what has happened.
- It can be very hard to start a conversation about a missing loved one with a young person but it's not as hard as carrying on as if nothing's wrong.
- It's all right for young people to see you upset. It gives them permission to express their emotions.
- Young people usually know when the adults around them are upset and worried. Trying to hide what you're feeling can lead to young people feeling excluded and can cause them more anxiety. They may become more watchful and look for whispered conversations and adults being upset.

- Young people may try to fill in the gaps if they're not informed about what's happening. If they think information is being withheld they may imagine it's too awful for them to be told the truth. Their imaginations may lead them to images and conclusions that are vivid and disturbing when there is no evidence to support this.
- Reassure the young person that you're not going anywhere. Young people may worry that if this can happen to someone they care about, it can also happen to another person close to them.

### **How long will it last? What has happened to the missing person? Why did he/she go? Is he/she alive or dead?**

*Ambiguous loss* is a term that is used to describe the type of loss that occurs when someone is missing. When someone we care about is missing, these questions and many others arise. There are few clear answers. It is difficult to understand and explain.

Understanding the term helps to explain the difficulties people experience when someone they care about is missing.

### **Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU)**

FFMPU offers information, counselling and support to young people and adults when someone is missing. You can talk to a counsellor on:

**Phone:** (02) 8688 8186 or 1800 227 772 (Freecall)

**Email:** [ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au)

**Web:** [www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)

### **In the Loop**

FFMPU also offers a group for young people living with the loss of a missing person called *In the Loop*. It is a safe and friendly place to meet others who understand what you're going through and to share ideas.

### **Kids Helpline**

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25. You can contact a counsellor on:

**Phone:** 1800 55 1800 (24hrs / 7 days)

**Email:** [counsellor@kidshelp.com.au](mailto:counsellor@kidshelp.com.au)

**Web:** [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

### **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](http://www.facebook.com/missing.501) • **Email** [ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au)

[www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)

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