

NEW JERSEY

Grief pervades New York

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Relatives seek some comforting word

NEW YORK — The family members came in tight knots yesterday, with siblings and parents, pushing strollers with bleary-eyed children, unloading from taxicabs and family cars at Pier 94, at 55th Street and the West Side Highway, in hopes of learning something.

Normally the site of cruise ship departures and happy wishes of "bon voyage," it was clear some relatives had come to the city's family center to say their last, sad goodbye.

A week after a terrorist attack leveled the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, thousands of people across the region are struggling to face the loss of a loved one working in, or helping others near, the former twin towers.

Lampposts, store fronts and church bulletin boards throughout the city are hung with the names and pictures of the missing, and makeshift memorials

with flowers and candles sprout at parks, small plazas and in front of firehouses. The photos on the fliers show happy people — a man who just caught a fish alongside his smiling son, a well-dressed couple toasting beside a birthday cake. Messages scrawled alongside telephone numbers — dozens with New Jersey exchanges — implore "Help me find my daddy," or "Manny, we love you!"

But with more than 5,000 people missing, around 200 bodies identified and rescuers reduced to finding body parts in the 16-acre wasteland left where the towers collapsed, hope of finding survivors has dimmed. No one buried in last week's tragedy has come out of the rubble alive in more than five days.

"At some point people are going to have to come to terms with the fact that their loved one is not coming home," ex-

plained Rutgers University psychology professor Caroline Clauss-Ehlers, who teaches in New Brunswick and lives in Manhattan. How long this takes depends on the family, she said, and what kind of physical remains they can collect.

"Something concrete, like having an actual body, will help the family move toward grief. But what we're seeing is so unprecedented (in the difficulty recovering complete bodies), it's hard to say what will happen."

Because some rescuers believe trapped victims can survive in such situations for up to 10 days, Clauss-Ehlers said it is normal for people to hold onto hope.

"But with every day, we have to move toward realizing people are not coming back," she said.

At some point family members should try to gain closure through some kind of memorial

service, she suggested, and emphasized the importance of telling children, in as calm a manner as possible when the time comes, that "Daddy's not ever coming back."

Family members of a victim will go through several stages of grief, Clauss-Ehlers explained, including denial, anger and depression. Many people are now going through a "bargaining" stage, she said, trying to "make deals" with themselves to feel better. Family members tell themselves that this wouldn't happen to such good parents, she said, or think they will find an answer through a friend or neighbor who works in government or at a hospital.

Those searching city hospitals or waiting at the city's family center may be going through this phase, she said, and it can take months to finally reach grief.

Clauss-Ehlers warned that it is not just those with family members hurt or killed that are impacted by the tragedy. Hearing about the disaster over and over in the office, listening to horror stories from strangers and watching the nonstop media coverage can add up to quite a burden, she said.

"This kind of secondary traumatization is normal," Clauss-Ehlers said. "You need to give yourself a break and get out of that environment, so that your life isn't just about this — which is hard, because this is so enormous."

The tragedy clearly weighed heavily on the family members who traipsed into the West Side center with toothbrushes, hair combs, razor blades and dirty clothes and emerged laden with pastel-colored teddy bears and books on grief. They came to check lists of the living and dead, talk to grief counselors or file a missing person's report with DNA evidence.