

A Survivor in the Aftermath

This guide has been written by members of Disaster Action, who are survivors and bereaved people from disasters. The disasters we have been affected by include the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, King's Cross underground fire, Lockerbie aircraft bombing, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, the 11th September attacks, the South East Asian Tsunami and the Bali, London 7 July and Sharm El Sheikh bombings and other recent terrorist attacks and transportation disasters.

Our aim is to enable you to understand what may happen after a disaster, giving you the opportunity to maintain some control over events. If you have been physically injured in a disaster, please read Disaster Action leaflet A Physically Injured Survivor in the Aftermath.

You may be reading this leaflet in a Survivor Reception Centre, in which case you should find Part One helpful. If not, please look at Part Two. (At a later stage the police and other agencies involved may set up a Humanitarian Assistance Centre, which could include virtual support through a dedicated website. This will be the focal point for information and assistance for families, survivors and others directly affected by the disaster.)

Part One: Survivor Reception Centre

A Survivor Reception Centre (SRC) may be set up by the police as soon as a disaster happens. Depending on the circumstances of the disaster there might be more than one SRC. You can ask the police to call a member of your family, or call yourself, to let them know that you are at the SRC. Ask them to let other members of the family and your friends know that you are all right.

What happens at the SRC?

Survivors who were not physically injured may be interviewed here by the police to identify those involved and to find out what they saw and heard. A police officer will ask you for your personal details and ask you questions about what happened. The officer will fill in a form with the information and pass it to the Casualty Bureau (CB). The CB is where the police gather all the information coming from the disaster site (and from outside sources) about who may be involved. If you don't feel able to talk about the disaster right away, tell the police officer that you would rather be interviewed later, or at your home (if this is what you want).

If you would prefer to have a member of your family or a friend with you while you are being interviewed, let the police know.

The police will also help you with any immediate needs you have as a result of the disaster. If, for example, you are temporarily homeless, they can assist you in finding emergency accommodation through social services. Depending on the circumstances, you may have the assistance of a police family liaison officer (FLO) or social worker.

What happened to those you were with?

This can be a deeply anxious time, especially if you got separated from relatives or friends who were with you when the disaster happened.

It would help the police if you gave personal details about anyone you were with at the disaster scene. A police officer will fill in a form with this information, which will be passed on to the CB.

If the police have any news about those you were with, they will let you know, but feel free to ask about what is happening.

Dealing with the media

It is likely that information about what happened will become available through social media very quickly after the disaster or even while it is still happening. However, bear in mind that what you learn from all media sources may not give you the amount - or accuracy - of information that you would like to have. You may be approached by the media, looking for photographs or interviews. It is up to you whether or not to talk to them, but remember that you cannot change your mind later about what you have said. You may be unable to stop them taking photographs, but don't be afraid to tell them to leave you alone. If the media is bothering you or your family, tell the police.

Part Two: The Aftermath

You may have left the scene of the disaster without having given your details to anyone and were understandably focusing on getting home. In the days and weeks following the disaster, what you have seen and heard may have an effect on you now and in the future.

Although you may not have been physically injured, coming to terms with a disaster can be difficult. Each person's experience of and feelings about a disaster are unique; some people may have problems because of it and others may not.

Contact with the authorities

Following a disaster the police may contact you to interview you in order to identify those involved and to discover what happened. If you would prefer to have a member of your family or a friend with you while you are being interviewed, let the police know.

Other organisations may be able to help you with practical and emotional needs, including the local authority, social services or voluntary organisations. Details may be publicised locally or nationally. The local authority may set up a telephone helpline to offer guidance to those who need help. You should be able to get the number from your police contact or social services.

How might you be affected?

You may have a number of different reactions, such as loss of appetite or sleepless nights. You might find it difficult to concentrate. You might have anxiety attacks. You may also find it hard to relate to family or friends who have not shared your experience. And you may keep re-living the disaster or have vivid flashbacks.

It is important to understand that these reactions are not abnormal in themselves. If they persist or disturb you, then you may find it beneficial to seek help. There's nothing wrong with knowing that you need help and trying to find it. Whether you feel you need help or not, take care in driving or doing other things that are potentially dangerous.

Survivor elation and survivor guilt

Survivors can experience elation or guilt. Both feelings are perfectly normal. Survivor elation is a reaction to the realisation that you have overcome an event where the outcome could have been much worse. Some people find that it can be a powerful aid to recovery. Survivor guilt comes at least partly from feeling you could have done more to protect those around you and that you survived when others did not.

If you feel you need help in dealing with such feelings, you can access further information and support through your GP and any dedicated services that may have been set up in the aftermath of the disaster. Some survivors find talking to others who have been similarly affected very helpful.

Personal property

After a disaster items of personal property may have become separated from their owners and later found at or near the site. If they have been recovered, you may have to wait some time for your possessions to be returned to you, or it is possible that they were destroyed. Ask the police about what will happen to the items. You may also find the DA leaflet *The Return of Personal Property* helpful in understanding how property is dealt with.

Where to find help

You can go to your GP (who can refer you to a counsellor) to talk about how you feel, but if he or she has had no training in disasters, they may be unsure how best to help you. There are a few clinics, mostly in London, which specialise in helping those affected by disasters. Ask your doctor what is available locally, and also see the links below.

Some people will not want or feel the need to talk to anyone outside the family and friends and for others it may be essential. There is nothing wrong with knowing that you need help and trying to find it.

If you contact a group but don't find it helpful, don't give up. It may be that whoever you spoke to was not the right person for you. It is never too early or too late to get help - the hard thing is to recognise, or admit, that you need it.

Getting together with others

A number of people may have been affected by the same disaster and perhaps now or in the future you might wish to talk to and/or meet them. Survivors from other disasters have found it beneficial to share their common experience. The authorities and Disaster Action may be able to help you to get in touch with others. You can also read our leaflets *Setting up a Survivor and/or Family Support Group*, and *Setting up and Running an E-forum Discussion Group*, both of which are on the Disaster Action website.

Disaster Action would like to thank all those who contributed to the writing of this leaflet.

Further Information

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Useful Contacts

Further Information