

Bringing People Together and Enabling the Development of Support Groups after Disaster

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

Disaster Support Groups

After disaster, as well as the kind of practical, financial and legal assistance that may be provided through services, many people find the opportunity to be in touch with others who have had similar experience, understanding and mutual support.

Communities spontaneously come together for support and there may be a natural impulse to convene support in times of crisis. Psychosocial support – in the form of family, group and/or community support to people's recovery after disaster.

For this reason disaster support groups, consisting of bereaved people and/or survivors with similar experiences and interests, are often formed after disasters. It has long been recognised that psychosocial support strategies that create and enable such opportunities are an important way of enhancing self-help, community resilience and recovery.

Some of those directly affected by disaster will not wish to join a support group while others may prefer to stay in touch with others and even lead a group. The reasons people wish to join groups vary, but include the need for mutual support, to share information and/or work together in the pursuit of common goals such as the need for compensation, incidents and/or legal outcomes.

Disaster Response and Recovery

Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, disaster response and recovery is the responsibility of the responsible authority, health authorities and police service. Personnel such as police family liaison officers, telephone operators, those managing reception and assistance centres may have direct contact with families and friends soon after a disaster.

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that providing information about opportunities for those affected to meet other people may be harmful for them and/or for any investigation. On the contrary, it is important that at the earliest opportunity people are given information and choices about how, where and when they may come together and meet in a comfortable and appropriate place. Those responsible for developing humanitarian assistance strategies should create and facilitate options for people to come together in this way.

Our experience is that people also benefit from meeting people from other disasters even where the circumstances of their experience has been different. With collective experience of 28 disasters DA members offer common support in the early aftermath and later, when the decision to meet others comes sometimes even years later.

Helping to Bring People Together

In the days and weeks following disaster many people will wish for and seek out opportunities to be in touch with others affected. As well as the growing use of social networking media, opportunities should be offered for people to meet face to face.

Depending on the circumstances there may be a natural or existing community or group of people already in contact with each other, for example where tragedy strikes a school or workplace. In other circumstances contact should be provided early on for contact between people who wish to meet each other because of the disaster itself.

Those responsible for emergency response and recovery (for example local and health authorities, the psychosocial service providers), can offer practical assistance to enable the formation of independent support groups. They can do this by:

- Collating and sharing of names and contact details of those affected by a disaster, in line with the protocols incorporated in government guidance of information sharing (see below)
- Informing those affected about opportunities to meet, including for example preparing a written meeting, which may be circulated privately through police family liaison officers or, if appropriate, through the media
- Identifying and/or providing early opportunities and appropriate places where meetings can be held, such as humanitarian assistance centres or other community centres
- Carefully planning, preparing and thinking through arrangements for meetings in view of the scale of the disaster; certain venues, dates and times may be more or less appropriate, and there may be special issues for bereaved people and for survivors
- Coordinating and taking care of practical arrangements for an initial meeting, such as refreshments, managing unwanted media presence and, as appropriate, arranging for official representatives to attend the meeting
- Working on the key principle that the best way to promote self help and independence is to enable survivors to maintain control of decisions about the development, direction and running of any support group
- Contacting DA for information, assistance, advice and support in relation to these principles and practice

How Disaster Action Can Help

DA has extensive experience of setting up and running disaster support groups. Many of our members have set up such groups after disaster. We have drawn on this experience in working with disaster responders worldwide. In addition, we provide information, advice and support to bereaved and survivors who have gone on to form their own unique groups. DA is itself a distinctive form of umbrella group, which follows the principles of high political and financial independence, activism and mutual support.

DA can advise on your emergency planning, response and recovery strategies by reviewing your psychosocial recovery plans, advising and assisting with the organisation and conduct of initial meetings, as well as providing independent information, support and advice to support groups in their early formation and ongoing development.

Further Information

‘When Disaster Strikes’, DA leaflets:

Setting up Family and/or Survivor Support Groups - http://www.disasteraction.org.uk/support/da_guide05.htm

Setting up and Running an E-forum Discussion Group –

http://www.disasteraction.org.uk/support/da_guide06.htm

Data Protection and Sharing – Guidance for Emergency Planners and Responders –

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-protection-and-sharing-guidance-for-emergency-planners-and-responders>

Eyre A. (2006) Identifying People’s Needs in Major Emergencies and Best Practice in Humanitarian Assistance. Independent report, commissioned by Department for Culture Media & Sport, October 2006

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/86357/ha_literature_re

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

Further Information

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Useful Contacts

Further Information