

Reflections on Personal Experience of Disaster

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.

Some of this may be painful to read, but our intention is to help those who may go through similar reactions after other disasters. We hope it may also help friends and family members to understand the feelings of those they care for. Those who helped us most did not try to categorise us or dictate how we should feel.

We have prepared this based on our own personal experiences of the effects of disaster and focus here on what it was like for us in the first days and months. While we wish to give an idea of how we felt emotionally there is a huge range of reactions and you may or may not feel something similar, either now or later.

Reflections from some survivors

Soon after the event

“The total shock of the event carried us through as did the deeper shock from euphoria at surviving. The ‘survivor guilt’ you hear about started early and was overwhelming at times. I felt guilt about everything and everyone, but once I could label it as such it started to become easier to deal with. I often wished I had died and reading about funerals and obituaries was like observing my own. A part of me had died and I needed to grieve.”

“Obsession with reading every account and watching every video clip of the disaster which comes on the news, etc. Having to record every programme and keep all the newspapers and articles (I have them to this day and they are very precious). I think this is about trying to make it ‘real’ when the feeling of utter disbelief is so strong and trying to get control back when everything has been out of control and all ‘routine’ matters of life are gone. Nothing felt normal anymore.”

“I noticed how people’s faces had changed from before the disaster – the young people I was travelling and survived with looked so much older, haggard, their childhood had gone.”

After a month or so

“Reports of having a ‘glazed’ look came up however within a month and the panic attacks and for some people (but not all) flashbacks were so bad as to be crippling and preventing travel, work, or concentration. What was needed was someone to talk to who had been in the accident. Feeling isolated, for some, added to the trauma.”

After a few months

“Into the ‘recovery’ survival, people ‘froze’, not able to move arms or legs. This was shocking and unexpected in itself. It would have been helpful to have understanding GPs but in some cases they had to learn from us as we went through our journeys.”

“We needed information on what the time scales might be to getting some financial support if people had lost jobs or were off work and injuries had led to serious financial hardship.”

“Survivors often felt their families and friends had no idea how to deal with these strange people who

had returned to live with them. There was no understanding or information available at the time and no support for the families. Survivors also didn't always see that their families were victims of the disaster too, albeit in a different way."

"Collecting belongings was a horrible experience with no understanding of the effect it might have on us. For us there was no information on what would happen and no attempt to single out belongings for individuals was made."

Reflections from some of the bereaved

Soon after the event

"Feeling at times devastated, howling with pain, at times numb with shock, still not quite believing it. Constantly going from one emotion to another, sometimes I am feeling crazy, it is almost a kind of euphoria, like I am free from fear, as the worst thing I could ever have imagined has happened, so now I fear nothing."

"Unable to concentrate on daily routine, I am taking an hour to remember to boil a kettle. I find most foods really hard to contemplate eating, especially meat."

"I am obsessing about how he died. Where was he exactly, did he suffer, did he know he was dying, what was it like for him? Going through it over and over in my mind. Reading every single newspaper every day – they have different stories about how it all happened. I can't work out where he was. I need to find someone who was there, but I daren't ask. Wishing I could have died instead."

"B is coping by working out the statistical probability of him having been there at that time. Tells me it's so close to zero as to be a non-probability. Makes no sense to me, but it is his 'mathematical' blokey way of coping."

"Getting his belongings back, everything smelled of soot and ash. Got us closer to him somehow, which sounds really crazy."

"Finding everything I read or watch on TV meaningless. Can't stand soppy sad movies in particular. I went to the library and started reading my way through every book with "death" in the title. Only things linked with him, it, or death mean anything."

"For the first few months we only wanted to be with people who knew him. Felt angry and impatient with people who are wasting time doing really trivial stuff, like arguing or getting upset with tiny unimportant details. This was not what life was about. We felt such amazing clarity about that."

"Some friends are good and supportive, others run away. I know it must be boring for them to have me wanting to talk about him, and it, all the time. But it's my way of keeping him alive."

"The ongoing trauma seems not to lessen, only change from anger to sadness to numbness and back almost daily."

Some months later

"I found it increasingly hard to relate to anyone who hadn't shared my experience. Friends thought they were doing the right thing by trying to 'make me feel better', which really wasn't helpful. I wanted to talk about my brother's death – where his body was found, who found him, and exactly how he had died. My brothers didn't want to talk about these things at all."

"All of us in the family were dealing with it in different ways – the dynamics between us had changed completely. The gap in the family seemed so big and the sadness was in knowing it couldn't

be filled again.”

“People continued to ask me how my parents were, but I felt increasingly – why don’t they ask about me? As ‘only’ a sister, I felt I was pushed down the so-called hierarchy of grief. It did help a bit when people I met from other disasters said the same thing had happened to them.”

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