

The Immediate Aftermath for Family and Friends

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.

You may be reading this in a Family and Friends Reception Centre, in which case start with Part One. If not, please look at Part Two.

Part One: Casualty Bureau and Family and Friends Reception Centre

Soon after a disaster occurs, the police set up a Casualty Bureau (CB). This is where the police gather all the information coming from the disaster site and from outside sources about who may be involved. An emergency telephone number will be given out through the media as soon as possible after the disaster. The priority for the police is to find and identify those who may be missing.

A Family and Friends Reception Centre (FFRC) for those concerned about anyone who may have been caught up in the disaster is likely to be set up. Information from here is passed on to the CB. The local authority, police and other agencies involved may set up a Humanitarian Assistance Centre (HAC) at a slightly later stage, which could include virtual support through a dedicated website. This will be the focal point for information and assistance for families and others directly affected by the disaster.

There may be a lot of people around you - the police, social workers, volunteers. Make sure you know who you are talking to and check their identification. If you give information that may help identify your relative or friend, don't assume it will be passed on to the police. Always speak to the police directly.

As it becomes necessary, each family will be given a police family liaison officer (FLO), who will be responsible for co-ordinating information about your relative or friend and giving you news either in person or on the telephone.

Whether you go to the FFRC or stay at home is your choice, but there should always be someone that your family's named police officer can get in touch with; make sure that your police contact knows who that person is. Also ensure that you know who is replacing your police officer when they go off duty.

If you go home, ask the police to telephone you at regular intervals even if they have no further news.

Identification

All those involved in a disaster will need to be identified.

What the police may need from you to assist in identifying your relative or friend:

- Physical description, including any distinctive features such as scars or tattoos

- Clear, recent photographs of them
- Name and address of their doctor and dentist
- Details of items they may have been wearing or had with them - driving licence, wallet, handbag, jewellery, keys
- Items that may contain fingerprints or DNA.

You can ask your FLO what identification methods are being used and to keep you informed with progress about the identification.

Can you check the hospitals?

If people have been injured in the disaster they will be taken to prearranged hospitals. It is your choice to go there if that is where you would most like to be. Bear in mind that treating the injured is the medical staff's priority and hospitals might only give out information when the police say they can.

What Happens Now?

Finding out what has happened to your relative or friend may happen quickly or it may take days, weeks or even longer. Throughout that time, your FLO will be your contact. The police will contact you as soon as they have any relevant information, but if some time has passed and you have not heard from them, telephone them again.

Don't feel you have to wait for news alone. Being with family and friends can be a great help at a time of such intense anxiety. The strain is great, however, and everyone will respond to it differently so don't be surprised if there is friction between you. It may also be helpful to talk to others who are waiting for news of their relatives and friends.

Accept offers of practical help to deal with the necessities of life. Let someone else drive you wherever you need to go.

Dealing with the media

You may be approached by the media, looking for photographs or interviews. They may also try to speak to children and young people in your family. Think carefully about whether this is appropriate and the possible consequences of such exposure through 24-hour news media.

It is your choice whether to talk to them, but bear in mind that your aim (finding out what has happened to your relative or friend) will not be the same as theirs. Remember too 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 tell the police.

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. What you learn from any media source may not give you the amount - or accuracy - of information that you would like to have.

Part Two: When you Know what has Happened to your Relative or Friend

You may find out that they have escaped the disaster unhurt. This is good news, although it can be difficult to come to terms with what has happened, even if someone has not been physically injured. If they have been injured the police will tell you, either by telephone or in person if you are at home.

If necessary, ask police advice about travel arrangements to visit them.

Your relative or friend may have been killed in the disaster. The first instinct of the police and others may be to protect you, and in so doing they may try to make decisions for you. This is okay if it feels right, but you can choose whether or not to take decisions yourself.

Access to the disaster site

While the emergency services are recovering those who have died, you are very unlikely to have access to the disaster site.

The police may also suggest that you do not visit the site until it has been cleared of debris and in any case you will not be able to do so until it is safe. If it is physically possible, you can go to the site if this is what you want. It can help in making the disaster real to you although some people will prefer not to go. You should do whatever feels best for you.

Post mortem and release

When someone dies in a disaster, the coroner (or procurator fiscal in Scotland) will require a medical examination of the body. A post mortem is likely to be carried out (though sometimes the coroner will decide not to have this done) by a pathologist to find out how the person died. Relatives and friends will have no choice in this and it may delay the release of the body.

If it can be arranged, a medical representative for the family may be present at the post mortem. If the police suspect that the disaster was the result of a crime, the body may not be released to the family for some time. If the coroner is holding the body, you are entitled to for an explanation. The body will only be released to the family when the coroner is satisfied about the identification and the police have finished their first investigations.

Seeing the body and photographs of the dead

The body is in the care of the coroner until it is released to the family. You can see the body and/or photographs provided the next of kin agrees. It may be suggested to you not to see the body, however, if the person was very badly injured. What may seem morbid or unacceptable to those not directly affected can be quite a natural thing to do. You are entitled to know the circumstances of the death if you wish. It is your choice. However, you may want to make this choice with your family, the police, and/or a counsellor.

It is reasonable to ask about the photographs that will have been taken of your relative or friend, and to find out where they will be kept and for how long. If you do not wish to see them now you might be able to do so at a later stage. Everyone will have different reasons why they do or do not want to see such photographs. Think about it carefully. And get as much information as you can from those who can help you make the decision. If you do decide to see them, now or in the future, it may help to do so with a professional counsellor.

Non-identification

You need to prepare for the possibility, however distressing it may seem, that the body will not be found and an identification cannot take place. Depending on the circumstances, it may take weeks, months or even longer before the police and the coroner can be certain that an identification is not possible.

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 relative or friend's possessions to be returned to the next of kin. It is possible that they were destroyed in the disaster. You can ask your FLO, if you have one, 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.

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. People 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.

Where to find help

The local authority may set up a telephone helpline may be set up by to offer guidance and support to those who need help. You should be able to get the number from your police contact or social services. Some people will not want or feel the need to talk to anyone outside the family and friends. For others it may be essential. There is nothing wrong with knowing that you need help and trying to find it.

Your GP 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 that specialise in helping those affected by disasters. Ask your doctor what is available locally and also see the links below.

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.

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

Useful links and resources

Disaster Action

Disaster Action

Disaster Action was founded as a charity in 1991 by survivors and bereaved people from UK and overseas disasters. We have collective personal experience of over 30 disasters, including rail, air and maritime as well as natural disasters and terrorist attacks in the UK and overseas.

<http://www.disasteraction.org.uk>

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Clinic

Specialists in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Provide assessment and therapy for those in London who have been affected by traumatic events such as disasters.

Telephone: 020 3228 2657.

<https://www.national.slam.nhs.uk/services/camhs/anxiety-traumatic-stress-clinic/>

Assist Trauma Care

If you or a member of your family have been affected by a trauma as a result of a disaster and would like to discuss whether therapy from ASSIST can help you, please telephone **01788 551919** or Email admin@assisttraumacare.org.uk.

<http://assisttraumacare.org.uk>

BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy)

BACP can help you find a therapist using their BACP Register and therapist directory. You can search their register and directory here:

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/how-to-find-a-therapist/>

<https://www.bacp.co.uk>

Compassionate Friends

Organisation of bereaved parents offering shared experience (with local groups throughout the country) and series of leaflets.

National UK helpline 0345 123 2304

<http://www.tcf.org.uk>

<http://www.tcf.org.uk>

Cruse - Bereavement Care

Cruse is a charity for bereaved people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support.

Helpline 0808 808 1677

<http://www.cruse.org.uk>

Samaritans

Provides confidential, non-judgemental emotional support 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

National helpline 08457 909090

<http://www.samaritans.org.uk>

South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (Traumatic Stress service)

Provides a clinical service for people suffering from PTSD. Telephone: 0203 228 6000.

<http://www.slam.nhs.uk>

UK Psychological Trauma Society

The UKPTS is a multidisciplinary society which aims to promote evidence-based care for those who suffer traumatic stress related mental health and foster a greater understanding of the effects of traumatic events. Their website provides access to a selection of material for the general public and for health professionals about post-traumatic stress reactions and includes information about trauma services across the UK.

<http://www.ukpts.co.uk>

Victim Support

Offers practical help and advice and emotional support to victims of crime and their families. Support line: 0808 1689 111.

<http://www.victimsupport.org.uk>

Useful Contacts

British Red Cross (BRCS)

The BRC responds to emergencies from major incidents to evacuations, floods and fires and has been involved in disaster support groups in the past.

<http://www.redcross.org.uk>

Foreign & Commonwealth Office

If you have been affected by an overseas disaster, the Consular Directorate of the FCO will be involved.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office>

Law Society

The Law Society can put you in touch with law firms specialising in disaster and personal injury litigation. **Telephone** 020 7320 5650.

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk>