



Helping to Bring People Together and Enabling the Development of Support Groups after Disaster

This leaflet has been written by members of Disaster Action (DA), all of whom are survivors and bereaved people from disasters. Some of the disasters we have been affected by are the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, King's Cross fire, Lockerbie air crash, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, Clapham, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, the 11 September attacks in the United States, the Bali bombing, the 7 July attacks in London and other terrorist attacks overseas.

Disaster Support Groups

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

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

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

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

Disaster Response and Recovery

Under the Civil Contingencies Act, disaster response and recovery is the responsibility of Category One responders such as the local authority, health authorities and police service. Personnel such as police family liaison officers, those operating telephone support lines and managing reception and assistance centres may have direct contact with families and others directly affected very soon after a disaster strikes.

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that providing information about opportunities for those affected to be in touch with each other may be harmful for them or and for investigative strategies. 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 safe, comfortable and appropriate environment. Those responsible for developing broader humanitarian assistance strategies should recognise and facilitate options for people to come together in this way; mutual support is a central principle in their psychological and social recovery.

Our experience is that people also benefit from meeting people from other disasters even where the actual disaster experience has been different. With collective experience of over 25 disasters DA members offer common understanding and support in the early aftermath and later whereby the decision to meet others comes after a greater passage of time.

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 by the disaster. As well as the growing use of social networking media for this, opportunities should be made available for those directly affected to be in physical contact with each other and meet face to face.

Depending on the circumstances of the disaster there may be a natural or existing community or group of people familiar and in contact with each other, for example where tragedy strikes a school or workplace. In other circumstances, such as after a transport-related or terrorist incident, opportunities should be provided early on for new contact between people who wish to meet each other because of the experience of the disaster itself.

Those responsible for emergency response and recovery (for example local and health authorities, the police and psychosocial service providers), can offer practical assistance to enable the formation of independent disaster 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 principles and protocols incorporated in government guidance of information sharing (see Further Information below)
- Informing those affected about opportunities to meet, including for example preparing a written invitation to a first meeting, which may be circulated privately through police family liaison officers or, where appropriate, publicly through the media
- Identifying and/or providing early opportunities and appropriate places where meetings can be held, for example in humanitarian assistance centres or other community-based centres
- Carefully planning, preparing and thinking through arrangements for meetings in view of the sensitivities associated with the disaster; certain venues, dates and times may be more or less appropriate, and there may be differing needs and issues for bereaved people and for survivors
- Coordinating and taking care of practical arrangements for an initial meeting, such as refreshments and exclusion of 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 attendees to maintain control of decisions about the development, direction and running of any support group they choose to set up
- Contacting DA for information, assistance, advice and support in relation to these principles and processes.

How Disaster Action Can Help

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

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

Further Information

‘When Disaster Strikes’, DA leaflets *Setting up Family and/or Survivor Support Groups* - http://www.disasteraction.org.uk/support/da_guide07.htm and *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 - <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/132709/dataprotection.pdf>

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

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/132790/ha_literature_review.pdf

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