



When Disaster Strikes A Survivor in the Aftermath

This guide has been written by members of Disaster Action, all of whom are survivors and bereaved people from disasters. Some of the disasters we have been affected by include the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, King's Cross fire, Lockerbie air crash, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, the 11th September attacks, the Tsunami and the Bali, 7 July and Sharm El Sheikh bombings.

If you have been physically injured in a disaster, please read Disaster Action leaflet *A Physically Injured Survivor in the Aftermath*, which accompanies this one.

You may be reading this in a Survivor Reception Centre, in which case you should find Part One helpful. If not, please look at Part Two.

Part One: Survivor Reception Centre

A Survivor Reception Centre (SRC) is set up by the police as soon as a disaster happens (Depending on the nature of the disaster, there may be more than one SRC.) After some disasters, the police and other agencies involved in the aftermath may set up a Humanitarian Assistance Centre (HAC), which will be the focal point for information and assistance for families, survivors and others directly affected by the disaster.

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. 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. This will help the police find out what happened.

What happens at the SRC?

A police officer will ask you for your personal details and to describe what you saw and heard. He or she will fill in a form with the information, which will be passed to the Casualty Bureau (CB). The CB is the centre 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 is 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.

Talking to people who understand

There may be social workers or counsellors whom you can talk to at the SRC if you want to. If you would like to talk straight away to those with a similar experience, contact Disaster Action (See Support Groups and Caring Organisations.)

Dealing with the media

You are likely to 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 a considerable effect upon 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 wish 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 during this time, including the local authority, social services or voluntary organisations. Details may be publicised locally or nationally.

A telephone helpline may be set up by the local authority to offer guidance to those who need help. You should be able to get the number from your police contact or social services. You may also have the assistance of a police family liaison officer and/or social worker.

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 find it hard to relate to your 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.

Where to find help

You can go to your doctor (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, or speak to Disaster Action.

Some of the organisations that try to help those who have been affected by traumatic events are listed under Support Groups and Caring Organisations.

Some people will not want or feel the need to talk to anyone outside the family and friends, although 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

There may have been a number of people affected by the same disaster and perhaps now or in the future, you might wish to talk to and/or meet some of 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 you will find on Disaster Action's website.

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Disaster Action

Telephone: 01483 799 066.

www.disasteraction.org.uk

ASSIST Trauma Support Care

Trauma Support Line Answer Service: 01788 560 800. Office: 01788 551 919.

www.traumatic-stress.freeserve.co.uk

Offers support and self-help in surviving trauma.

BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy)

Will give list of counselling organisations and practitioners in your area, their specialisation and fees (some do not charge). Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: 1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwickshire. CD21 2PF.

Office: 01455 883300

Information on counsellors: 01455 883316

www.bacp.co.uk

British Red Cross Society (BRCS)

Telephone: 020 7877 7250

www.redcross.org.uk

The BRCS responds to emergencies from major incidents to evacuations, floods and fires.

Cruse - Bereavement Care

Offers counselling, advice and the chance to meet other bereaved people throughout the UK.

126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR.

Telephone: 0208 939 9530

Helpline: 0844 477 9400

www.crusebereavementcare.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

www.slam.nhs.uk

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)

NICE publishes guidance for the treatment of disorders and conditions on the NHS. One of these guidelines relates to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You can access information on the PTSD guideline at <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG26/publicinfo/pdf/English>

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.

www.samaritans.org.uk

Traumatic Stress Clinic

Telephone: 020 7530 3666.

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

UK Trauma Group

The UK Trauma Group is a managed clinical network of UK Traumatic Stress Services. Their website provides access to a selection of material for the general public and for health professionals about post traumatic stress reactions.

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

Victim Support

Offers practical help and advice and emotional support to victims and their families following crime. (Monday-Friday 9.00am - 5.30pm).

Telephone: 0845 303 0900.

www.victimsupport.org.uk

Useful Contacts

Some or all of the organisations listed below may be helpful to you, depending on the circumstances of the disaster.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Humanitarian Assistance Unit (HAU)

The HAU has responsibility within Government for coordinating support in the UK to those affected by major disasters. If you are having difficulty accessing support services or have questions about help that may be available, write to the HAU, DCMS, 2-4 Cockspur Street, London SW1Y 5DH, email

hau@culture.gsi.gov.uk or call 0207-211-6200.

http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Humanitarian_assistance/

Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Telephone: 0207 270 1500

www.fco.gov.uk

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

Law Society

Telephone: 0207 242 1222

www.lawsociety.org.uk

They can put you in touch with law firms specialising in disaster and personal injury litigation.

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