



When Disaster Strikes The Immediate Aftermath for Family and Friends

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 are 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.

Our aim is to enable you to understand what may happen in the hours, days and weeks after the disaster, giving you the opportunity to maintain some control over events. You may be reading this in a Family and Friends Centre or a Humanitarian Assistance Centre, in which case you should find Part One helpful. If you are not in such a Centre, please look at Part Two.

Part One: Casualty Bureau and Family and Friends Reception Centre

Soon after a disaster occurs, the police set up an information-gathering centre called 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 practicable after the disaster. The priority for the police is to find and identify those who may be missing.

There will also be a Family and Friends Reception Centre (FFRC), for those concerned about anyone who may have been caught up in the disaster. Information from here is passed on to the CB. After some disasters, the local authority, 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 and others directly affected by the disaster.

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 any news, either in person or on the telephone.

There may be a lot of people around you - the police, social workers and 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 that it will be passed on to your FLO. Always speak to your police contact directly.

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 - and 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 only to say that they have no further news.

Talking to people who understand

There may be social workers or counsellors whom you can talk to at the FFRC 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).

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 of your relative or friend, 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.

Ask your FLO what identification methods are being used. You also need to know whether the police will wait until identification is certain before telling you, or whether they will say if an identification looks likely.

Can you check the hospitals?

If people have been injured in the disaster they will be taken to prearranged hospitals. If you feel that is where you would most like to be, that is your choice. Bear in mind that treating the injured is the medical staff's priority, and hospitals will probably 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 information about your relative or friend, but if some time has passed and you have not heard from them, telephone them again.

Don't feel that 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.

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

It may also be helpful to talk to others who are waiting for news of their relatives and friends.

Dealing with the media

You are likely to be approached by the media, looking for photographs or interviews. It is your choice whether or not to talk to them, but remember 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 or your family, tell the police.

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 may 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.

For everyone who has been caught up in a disaster, the future will be different and both you and they may find you need help in facing it. Contact Disaster Action if you would like to talk to others with a similar experience.

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 suggest that you do not visit the site until it has been cleared of debris and it is safe to do so. Talk to them about this. If it is physically possible, go to the site if this is what you want - even if you have to travel some distance to get there. Visiting the site can help in making the disaster real to you. Some people will prefer not to go, but 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 done (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 immediately. If the coroner is holding the body, ask him or her to explain why.

The body is 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. It may be suggested to you not to see the body, if the person has been badly injured. You have a right to know the circumstances of death, to look at the body and at photographs of your relative or friend if you wish. It is your choice. However, you may want to make this choice with your family, the police, or a counsellor.

As a member of the family or friend, you can see the body, provided the next of kin agrees. What may seem morbid or unacceptable to those not directly affected can be quite a natural thing to do.

It may help to have a doctor or professional counsellor to talk over the options with you, and to be with you if you decide to see the body.

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.

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 incredible it may seem, that no body will be found. It may take weeks, or even longer, before the police and the coroner can be certain that an identification is not possible.

Where to find help

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.

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.

Your doctor 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, or speak to Disaster Action.

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.

Some of the organisations that try to help the bereaved and others affected by traumatic events are listed below.

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Disaster Action

Telephone: 01483 799 066.

www.disasteraction.org.uk

ASSIST Trauma Support Care

Offer support and self-help in surviving trauma.

Trauma Support Line Answer Service: 01788 560 800.

www.traumatic-stress.freeserve.co.uk

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

Compassionate Friends

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

Helpline: 0117 953 9639.

www.tcf.org.uk

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

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

Telephone: 020 77530 3666.

<http://www.cimhscaretrust.nhs.uk/pages/go.asp?pageID=511&Path=4&Parent=287.072&instance=451>

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 Humanitarian Assistance Unit 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.

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.

British Red Cross Society (BRCS)

Telephone: 0844 871 11 11

www.redcross.org.uk

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

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