Bringing People Together and Enabling the Development of Support Groups after Disaster

This guide has been written by members of Disaster Action, who are survivors and bereaved people from disasters we have been affected by include the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, King’s Cross underground fire, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, St James’ Park train crashes, the 11th September attacks, the South East Asian Tsunami and the Bali, London 7/7, Sheikh bombings and other recent terrorist attacks and transportation disasters.

Disaster Support Groups

After disaster, as well as the kind of practical, financial and legal assistance that may be provided through services, many people find the opportunity to be in touch with others who have had similar experience of a disaster as useful and in some circumstances probably even more important than that offered by the statutory services. Communities spontaneously come together for support and there may be a natural impulse to convene a group of the bereaved to support in times of crisis. Psychosocial support – in the form of family, group and/or community support – can be of tremendous importance both in the early days and weeks after a disaster and in the recovery process.

For this reason disaster support groups, consisting of bereaved people and/or survivors with similar experiences, are often formed after disasters. It has long been recognised that psychosocial support strategies can help people to cope and enable such opportunities are an important way of enhancing self-help, community resilience and mutual support.

Disaster Response and Recovery

Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, disaster response and recovery is the responsibility of responsible authorities, health authorities and police service. Personnel such as police family liaison officers, telephonists, emergency services personnel, those managing reception and assistance centres may have direct contact with families and survivors soon after a disaster.

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that providing information about opportunities for those affected to come together may be harmful for them and/or for any investigation. On the contrary, it is important that at the earliest possible stage people are given information and choices about how, where and when they may come together and meet. Mutual support, to share information and/or work together in the pursuit of common goals such as the investigation of the incident and/or legal outcomes.

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 who have been bereaved and affected. As well as the growing use of social networking media, opportunities should be offered for those bereaved and affected to meet face to face.
Depending on the circumstances there may be a natural or existing community or group of people already in contact with each other, for example where tragedy strikes a school or workplace. In other circumstances, contact should be provided early on for contact between people who wish to meet each other because of the event or disaster itself.

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

**How Disaster Action Can Help**

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

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

**Disaster Action Leaflets**


**Useful links and resources**

**Further Information**

**Data Protection and Sharing – Guidance for Emergency Planners and Responders**

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