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When Disaster Strikes

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Setting Up Family and/or Survivor Support Groups

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 fire, Lockerbie air crash, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, the 11th September attacks in the United States and the Bali bombing. The aim of this leaflet is to help those setting up their own support groups after disaster by sharing the lessons from our common experiences.

What is a disaster family support group?

A family support group is a group of people affected by the same disaster who gather to support each other by sharing information, giving each other emotional and practical support and/or by focusing on issues important to them. The group can include bereaved family members, survivors and their families and others affected by the disaster. Depending on the circumstances of the disaster and the needs of the members, any group that emerges may be large, or small, or divided into smaller sub-groups.

Why do you need a group?

People affected by a disaster often feel that the lasting effects of their trauma can only be fully understood by those who share experience of the same event.

Following any disaster, whatever its origin, there are likely to be practical problems to overcome. Any inquest and/or criminal inquiry process can be easier to cope with if you have the support and understanding of others affected. The process of seeking help from government services, voluntary agencies, the legal profession or insurance companies can also seem fraught with difficulty. Support groups, in which you can offer each other concrete advice and suggestions about how to deal with specific issues and problems can be very helpful.

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How do groups help?

The extracts below are personal views based on the experiences of individuals who have been affected by different disasters.

'You do have a common grief, therefore you feel no need to explain your pain or suffering, it is almost like having a shorthand in conversation and feelings.'

'As a group, we were heard by the government on issues such as memorial services. If we didn't have a group, decisions would have been made for us.'

'For some who grieve, to be involved in something positive, to have an agenda to follow (for example a memorial, or an intention never to let this happen again) helps, especially I think for men.'

'People bereaved by a horrific disaster – or afflicted by the shock of having survived one – are consumed by a mixture of grief and anger. These emotions are inescapable but quickly become destructive. The only remedy is to channel them into a constructive activity such as a support group.'

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The practicalities

First steps

If you are interested in setting up a family support group but don't know how to get in touch with others affected by the disaster, those police forces responding in the aftermath may be able to help. Home Office guidance for emergency planners and others responding to the needs of people affected by disasters includes some information on assistance for families.

Depending on the nature of the disaster and where it happened, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and/or the relevant local authority may also be able to help. They cannot release contact details of people affected, for reasons of confidentiality. However, they should be able to contact everyone on their list with your request. Or they may help set up an initial meeting for survivors and bereaved families who may wish to attend, as has been done after some other disasters.

What next?

The initial meeting will be an opportunity for you to meet people affected by the same disaster, perhaps for the first time, and to find out whether they may want to be part of a group. Getting together for the first time may be an emotional occasion, but for many people the future benefits of contact with others in a similar position will be worth it.

Our experience shows that the most harmonious groups are those which establish a clear purpose and aims. Such aims may be to offer each other mutual emotional and practical support, to provide representation with external agencies, to share common experience and information or to organise memorials. It may be helpful to develop a written constitution including a clear statement of aims and objectives for the group.

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How should the group be structured?

There are a number of different options for the structure of family groups in terms of membership, legal status and management. In the past a few groups have chosen to apply for charitable status; there are pros and cons associated with having this status. Some groups have set up an unincorporated association, while others have decided to be as informal as possible. We suggest that legal advice on these options be obtained very early on in the life of the group, so that the status of the group will be chosen to best fit its nature and purpose. You will need a solicitor who specialises in the charity field and you can find contact numbers through the Law Society - see Useful Contacts below.

Whatever the nature of the group, committee members will need to be elected and decisions taken about who will carry out key roles such as arranging meetings, taking notes and looking after the accounts. Having clearly defined and accepted key roles and ways of working are particularly important, especially when conflicts may arise and emotions run high.

From then on, regular meetings of the support group can be organised by the committee. The group may choose to distribute a regular newsletter and/or to set up a website. Some groups have found it helpful to set up smaller, regional subgroups where people can get to know each other better and focus on the issues they have most in common. Good communication channels between members are important and telephone-based meetings or email forums may make this possible if members live far apart or may not wish to attend all meetings.

Whatever option you choose for how the group is set up, advice and support is available from those who have done this before, and from other organisations in Useful Contacts below.

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How will the group be funded?

Once the constitution of the group is agreed the group will be in a position to look for funding to cover its expenses. Depending on the nature of the disaster, funding may or may not be available through any disaster trust fund that was set up in the aftermath, or from other sources such as charitable trust funds or government departments.

How long should the group last?

In our experience all groups are different and differing views may emerge on how long individuals wish personally to remain part of a group. Some groups continue for many years, while others disband after they fulfil a specific purpose. A group should not be judged as a 'success' or a 'failure' because of how long it lasts. Many of us have made friends within our own groups and these friendships have lasted well beyond the formal life of the group.

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What can the pitfalls be and how can they be avoided?

Differences within the group

Inevitably people will respond to a disaster in different ways and have both common and unique needs. While the group will need to have a core set of agreed aims, there are still likely to be different priorities for individuals at different times. Recognising and accepting these differences, rather than seeing them as a problem, may help the group evolve over time and focus when appropriate on the need for a common group response to key issues and concerns.

If the group elects one or more people to act on behalf of the group, or to make statements on the group's behalf, it is important to ensure that any messages conveyed to those outside the group – such as the media or government departments – reflect the overall interests of the wider group.

Will you be able to cope with working for the group?

A potential difficulty for those who take on more responsibility in the group is that they might find the additional workload tiring, given that the aftermath of any disaster is bound to be stressful. You may be struggling to cope with day-to-day commitments in addition to the needs of the group. One possible way of dealing with this is to accept offers of help from friends and relatives. You may be able to get their assistance in the more practical aspects of running the group.

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How can Disaster Action help?

As an umbrella group concerned with the general principles relevant to any disaster, Disaster Action is able to offer suggestions on all the issues raised above, and can be an ongoing source of support once a group is set up. Individuals, and/or a group, are also welcome to join Disaster Action if they wish to.

Useful Contacts

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

Disaster Action

Telephone: 01483 799 066
Website: www.disasteraction.org.uk

Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Telephone: 0207 270 1500
Website: 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
Website: www.lawsociety.org.uk

They can put you in touch with law firms specialising in the charity field.

British Red Cross Society (BRCS)

Telephone: 020 7877 7250

The BRCS responds to emergencies from major incidents to evacuations, floods and fires.
Website: www.redcross.org.uk

Charity Commission

Telephone: 0870 333 0123
Website: www.charity-commission.gov.uk

The regulator and registrar for charities in England and Wales , they can offer advice on legal issues regarding the group status.

Disaster Action would like to express its appreciation to all those involved in the preparation of this leaflet, both within and outside the organisation.