

Coming home after the tsunami

Bereavement support at Heathrow airport



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'IMAGINE THE VERY WORST that you can and magnify it a hundred times' – a comment from a survivor of the SE Asian tsunami of 26 December 2004. The distressing scenes on television could only begin to bring home the scale, the suddenness, the death and devastation. In London five days later, as visitors to the stricken areas began to arrive home, Cruse Bereavement Care, the leading UK bereavement charity, was asked to help and subsequently joined the police team meeting planes and providing support at Heathrow airport. This report covers the first three weeks of that involvement.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, world attention has rightly focused on the plight of all those living near the Indian Ocean who have been bereaved, made homeless or injured in conditions of great hardship. Some of those affected who were visitors to the area at the time have been able to return to countries where they are protected from the worst extremes of material deprivation. However, such physical comforts are no protection against grief, or the lasting impact of trauma upon mental and emotional wellbeing.

Cruse has a long history of providing support in the event of suicide, homicide and road death and this experience has enabled us to adapt appropriately to larger scale events. Volunteers have been able to offer psychological help after many disasters, including Zeebrugge and Hillsborough.

Following the terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001 during which nearly 3,000 people were killed, a team of Cruse volunteers went to New York to provide support to the families of the 67 British people who were killed. The relationship that developed with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office at that time resulted in Cruse contributing to the training of rapid deployment teams – consular staff who have volunteered to provide a disaster response in any part of the world.

The initial involvement

On New Year's Eve the Foreign Office approached Cruse asking for a presence at Heathrow airport and literature about our support services to distribute to a 'mercy/rescue' flight of 190 passengers affected by the disaster arriving from Bangkok the next day. After discussion with the Red Cross duty manager it was agreed that I would give a briefing to the Red Cross volunteers on New Year's Day before the flight arrived. I also talked to some of the police family liaison officers (FLOs) who were meeting the flight. FLOs are trained to deal with major crime investigations where people have died, and are very experienced in working with those who are traumatised and bereaved. Their role at Heathrow is to provide support to bereaved people and to gain information to help them trace missing persons.

Packs of Cruse information relevant to those who had been injured or bereaved were distributed. These addressed the sorts of feelings that people might be experiencing as well as detailing Cruse services, including website, email, helpline, and the face-to-face support available from nearly 5,000 volunteers across the UK. The packs also included information for adults on helping bereaved children, and a booklet designed and written by

EDITOR'S NOTE

Because its impact was upon coastal areas, which attract tourists, a considerable number of those bereaved by the tsunami came from outside the disaster area. Those family members who survived the impact, and others who flew out to the disaster zone in order to search for missing persons, identify bodies etc were subject to enormous stress and grief. In this paper Debbie Kerslake describes the services that have been set up in the UK to support these families when they return and to provide telephone and other support to all people bereaved by the tsunami in the UK. CMP

young people for young people'.

A Cruse colleague spent that day with the FLOs supporting bereaved individuals and families returning from Bangkok while I waited with families and friends who had come to the airport to be reunited with loved ones. Some families began to tell their stories while we were waiting and information on Cruse services was distributed.

I was asked to be available for several flights returning from SE Asia the following day. This ensured the availability of support if required and also allowed the opportunity to talk further with the police about the services that Cruse could provide to people returning home. The police then asked if Cruse could continue to be

available for those who needed the support and to assist them in their work. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office agreed to fund this.

How the Cruse response was organised

Despite being a public holiday, it was possible to make rapid contact with Cruse branches within easy reach of Heathrow on 3rd January. Each person contacted phoned others locally and the vital next early morning (5.00 am) shift was immediately covered. By the following week, a larger pool of 57 volunteers had been enlisted from London and the south east of England. The police asked us to provide two volunteers for each shift and in the event this proved to be very valuable, as they were able to support one another.

Other agencies involved

A multi-disciplinary team provides support at the airport for this response. So far, this has been made up of the police, Cruse, the London Ambulance Service supported by the British Red Cross, airport chaplains drawn from a range of faiths including Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, and Travel-Care, Heathrow's own independent team of crisis social workers who co-ordinate the response to the human welfare aspects, in partnership with the local authority, the London Borough of Hillingdon.

The police are the lead agency, carrying overall responsibility, with volunteers working at their request. The mixing of helpers from a number of agencies and with different and sometimes overlapping skills and roles could have led to difficulties, but this has not been the experience. Agencies have worked well together, recognising the skills that each brings and the commitment to support those affected by the disaster. Time spent waiting to be called upon has been used for sharing information about the work of each organisation and offloading situations that have been dealt with.

Recruitment of volunteers

Volunteers for this sort of work need special skills, and those who were recruited had to meet specific requirements. It was essential that they had extensive experience of dealing with bereavement in traumatic circum-

stances, eg suicide, homicide and road death. It was important that they were available for early starts and late finishes – and able to accept that, despite being there, they might not be needed. There were other practical issues to be considered, such as transport and the walking involved in working in an airport terminal.

In this situation, the role requires flexibility, intuition and the ability to be proactive, for instance to suggest tactfully to the police ways in which a volunteer might be helpful. A team-working orientation is very important. Volunteers must be prepared to go into situations not knowing what has happened, whether the person or family is bereaved or whether they have been traumatised by what they have witnessed.

Volunteers do a maximum of two sessions per week with shifts beginning at 5.00 am and 5.00 pm, staying for a minimum of four hours to cover the flights arriving from Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Colombo. Sometimes the survivors take a circuitous route back and come in from unlikely destinations. A standby list of those who can reach the airport quickly ensures that support can be provided in this situation.

A briefing meeting was held for the volunteers, involving the police, Cruse senior managers and the Heathrow Travel-Care team leader. The volunteers were provided with a briefing pack containing a summary of Cruse's role in disasters taken from *Bereavement Care in Practice*², a *British Medical Journal* article on trauma³, essential practical information and support telephone numbers.

The role of Cruse volunteers

The role of Cruse volunteers in this situation is to:

- Provide emotional first aid
- Be with people who are in shock or acute distress
- Facilitate the expression of feelings
- Assist other agencies
- Act as supportive members of a multi-agency team

The role is non-intrusive. Police board every flight from the countries affected by the disaster and ask for people affected by the disaster to make

'Some of those returning, even two weeks after the disaster, were still nowhere near the point of accepting that their loved one was dead'

themselves known. Sometimes individuals do not do this until they reach the gate, when they can be overwhelmed with emotions.

The FLOs make people aware of the support available at the airport, including the presence of a Cruse volunteer if they wish to talk to someone. In addition to those bereaved and traumatised this offer is made to others, such as police returning after working in the countries affected in the relief operation. Many, after a 12-hour flight, are desperate to get home but welcome the literature distributed by the police. Others do ask to see someone.

The support needed

Many of those returning have been bereaved; a significant number have lost children; others have loved ones still missing. Cruse volunteers have had to be careful not to use the words 'bereaved' or 'bereavement'. Some of those returning, even two weeks after the disaster, were still nowhere near the point of accepting that their loved one was dead and continued to cling on to the belief that they could be found alive. The initial shock and numbness that may be experienced in any bereavement has seemed for many to last longer in this case, perhaps a necessary safety mechanism amid such horrors.

The majority of those seen by Cruse have been profoundly affected. Volunteers have been struck by the intensity of feelings and the speed with which an individual can swing between emotions, one minute being extremely angry, the next breaking down in tears of despair. People want someone to listen to their story and share their emotions, as well as to offer advice and assistance as to how best they can cope with the terrible ordeal they have faced. The anger that is vented is often directed at official agencies for what is perceived as lack of support given whilst abroad and delays in the recovery, identification or return of bodies.

Many survivors have described being guilt-ridden – guilt at surviving when so many died; guilt at not being able to save family or friends or strangers. Individuals who have displayed extraordinary acts of courage have still been left with the memories of those they could not save, as well as regrets at what may not have been given to a relationship now lost.

Many have been injured, but for those who have survived without the pain of injury or bereavement there is still the awareness of what might have been. For some it was children who were not with them but who could have been; others had been on the beach minutes earlier or in buildings that subsequently collapsed.

People have sobbed as they have recounted their experiences. One person spoke of the relief of at last being with someone who was not themselves grieving. Volunteers have sat alongside people in their torment and despair, listening to their feelings of anguish and helplessness and graphic descriptions of the death and destruction that they have seen. Some of the survivors need information about the symptoms and feelings they, or other family members, are experiencing and where to obtain more help and advice. Often what is important is simply the reassurance that the feelings they are experiencing are normal.

Who has sought help?

In the first three weeks the Cruse team at the airport saw 63 individuals. Some were there when the wave struck, and needed to describe how they survived and what they witnessed. Many parents have been more concerned for their children and were keen to be informed of the range of services Cruse can provide for them. Others had gone out following the disaster to look for loved ones. They described being quite unprepared for the terrible sights that they were met with on arrival. Some of those of those returning had been seriously injured and hospitalised.

Some of those seeking help have been people who were on holiday but who were called upon because of their professional skills. Whilst pleased to be able to help, many of these individuals have been thrown into roles without the support, supervision or equipment

that they would normally have.

Many survivors have been young people on holiday or travelling the world. Some have never had a bereavement or seen a dead body before. Now they may be experiencing multiple losses of family and or friends, and dealing with the sight of countless corpses. One young man described having to look at over one hundred mutilated, decomposing bodies before identifying that of his friend. A number of people were experiencing vivid, intrusive memories of the disaster, flashbacks and terrifying nightmares, symptoms which if they persisted could result in post-traumatic stress disorder. They were advised to see their doctor immediately and, if necessary, seek specialist help.

Some of those seen by Cruse have been relatives and friends waiting for loved ones to return and wanting to know how best they can help. What can they say? What can they do?

Support and supervision

For volunteers working in this situation, support and supervision are vital. As the manager of the response I have direct contact with all volunteers, who are asked to phone me at the end of their shift to discuss who they have seen and what they have heard. This acknowledges the volunteers' response, enables them to receive immediate support and allows any problems to be addressed without delay. In this way, we can identify any difficulties which may need discussion with police colleagues and which can be fed back into the management of support systems.

Volunteers are also supported by the supervision system already in place for their normal work with bereaved people: each is asked to arrange a session with their personal supervisor as soon as is practicable after their shift. Contact numbers of three senior members of Cruse staff are available for volunteers to use at any time while they are working at the airport.

What is it like for the volunteers?

Practical problems

Volunteers have described a sense of nervous anticipation before their first shift so, just before this, an individual discussion takes place to answer any questions and talk about the kinds of situations previous volunteers have

met. The briefing pack, welcoming approach of the FLOs, support of the team leaders and the level of expertise demonstrated by all members of the team undoubtedly help.

Difficulties encountered have been primarily related to the different way of working. There is little if any time to prepare and volunteers may sit down with an individual or family knowing only brief details of their circumstances. The volunteer has a very brief period in which to establish any kind of relationship. People are extremely tired after a long flight and often relatives are waiting. Some volunteers used to working one-to-one can be faced with meeting a number of people together. One described her frustration at talking to a man whose friends had been killed, while a professional who had accompanied him back to this country kept speaking on his behalf. It can at times be difficult to contain a natural wish to hear the end of the story: a volunteer described wanting to ask questions but having to hold back.

Thanks to the generosity of volunteers it has not been difficult getting together the 60 needed to cover the shifts. However, co-ordinating the whole support operation and maintaining good relationships has required considerable administrative support and expertise from the office support team.

Emotional issues

The work is changing as time goes by. Initially people returning appeared dazed and confused, still in a state of shock. One volunteer providing support to survivors soon after the disaster described how their numbness and shock induced a kind of distance, or echoing numbness, which had to be guarded against. The airport environment itself can induce a sense of unreality. However, as the weeks go by those returning appear more traumatised, perhaps because they have been injured and in hospital, or because they have had a longer exposure to the horror.

Volunteers have commented that listening to real stories and being alongside people in their raw grief brings the disaster alive in a way that seeing it on television cannot do.

He was one of the most traumatised people I've ever seen

He looked wild, like a crazed animal.

When you looked into his eyes you could see how much pain he was in.

The intensity of the feelings can be difficult to hold: one volunteer described being with a mother whose children had been killed.

I looked into the hollows of her eyes and felt her loss.

However, the survivors have made clear the value of the support they have received. They know that they are not alone and that ongoing support is available, even if the Cruse literature offered is initially put away in a drawer or kept for them by a relative or FLO. One volunteer said that she had donated money to the Disasters Emergency Committee but this felt a much more direct way of being able to help those affected.

Ongoing and future support

As well as the airport support, Cruse volunteers have been assisting on the tsunami support line managed by the Red Cross. Requests for help by those affected have already started to reach local Cruse services and the national helpline (0870 167 1677).

Many thousands will be affected by this disaster, not only those bereaved and injured and those whose loved ones were lost on holiday in the area, but also the many ethnic minorities living in the UK and other countries who have lost family members resident in the tsunami zone. For many, there will now be an interminable wait for a body and for some the wait will never end, making it even more difficult to come to terms with the loss.

This event will challenge all those involved in bereavement to re-examine their responses to extraordinary events and to the bereavement we encounter every day. The team at Heathrow has been asked to be present for a period of at least eight weeks, but this is only the beginning. The support for those affected by this disaster will be needed over the next weeks, months and years ahead. ●

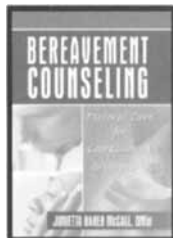
References

1. Cruse Youth Involvement Project. *After Someone Dies*. London: Cruse Bereavement Care, 2004.
2. *Bereavement Care in Practice*. London: Cruse Bereavement Care, 2004.
3. Mayou R, Farmer A. Trauma. *British Medical Journal* 2002; 325: 426-429.

BOOK REVIEWS

Bereavement Counselling Pastoral Care for Complicated Grieving

Junietta Baker McCall



Binghamton, NY, USA,
Haworth Pastoral Press
2004, 325pp
\$39.95 hb
ISBN 0 78901 783 0
\$19.95 pb
ISBN 0 78901 784 9

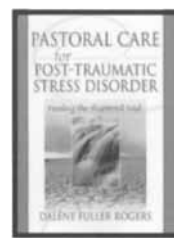
Bereavement Counselling is part of the Howarth Press Pastoral Care series combining the approaches of clinical and spiritual care for bereaved people. Particularly in the light of recent events in South East Asia, this practical guide to the assessment and treatment of complicated grief offers an invaluable resource to those likely to be helping families who have experienced trauma.

Dr McCall, Director of Pastoral Services at New Hampshire Hospital and psychotherapist, writes in an accessible style, combining narrative illustrations and theoretical summaries. The volume is set out in a format which makes for ease of reading from cover to cover, as well as for use as a reference book. She describes universal grief processes and more complex grieving, and suggests helpful interventions to deal with the latter. Coming from a religious background she sets out the potential resources or obstacles which religious spirituality presents for the resolution of grieving, and its relevance for those seeking answers to the meaning of life in the face of trauma and disaster, as so many have recently.

For the bereavement supporter and counsellor alike, this volume will be a welcome source of ideas for intervention suited to those facing complex grief. Though written from a Christian perspective, the religious elements in this book are related to spirituality as a function of personality, rather than a specific religious tradition. Dr McCall's ideas would be relevant and helpful to a person of any faith sympathetic to the idea that spirituality is potentially a useful aspect of a person's resources for coping with life.

Pastoral Care for Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder Healing the Shattered Soul

Daléne Fuller Rogers



Binghamton, NY, USA
Haworth Pastoral Press
2002, 122 pp
\$29.95 hb
ISBN 0 78901 541 2
\$19.95 pb
ISBN 0 78901 542 0

Many events in life seem to be increasingly recognised as stressful to a traumatic degree. In addition to a bereavement, the pastoral caregiver may well find that clients have experienced a variety of traumatic factors that impact upon their ability to work through their loss. Though written from a mainly Christian standpoint, clergy of all faiths will value the insights offered by this volume into the nature of trauma, and the practical suggestions for the support of victims.

Daléne Rogers writes concisely yet in detail about the nature of PTSD, defining in accessible terms its nature and causes. She categorises its antecedents under natural, accidental and intentional disasters, and examines the nature of sexual, physical, psychological and spiritual trauma. The descriptions of the manifestations of loss will be familiar but, as well as discussing psychological issues, Rogers provides practical suggestions, illustrated with case histories, for supporting victims of trauma through a healing process.

Other important topics covered include self-care for the carer, the special needs of veterans, and practical considerations about referring on to therapists, psychiatrists or doctors. Intended as a resource for mental health professionals and pastoral care providers, the book deals thoughtfully with a very sensitive area of experience. As with other volumes in the Pastoral Press series, it incorporates interdisciplinary insights into this increasingly common experience. ●

Peter Hammersley

Prison Chaplain