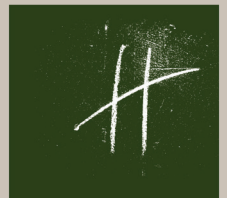


LIFE AFTER CAPTIVITY

A reintegration guide for former hostages,
including those who have been arbitrarily detained



HOSTAGE
INTERNATIONAL

Please note that if you feel the need for free, independent and fully confidential emotional or practical support, contact Hostage International:

info@hostageinternational.org

www.hostageinternational.org

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INTRODUCTION

Rebuilding your life

Returning hostages and those who have been arbitrarily detained all have very individual experiences: differing lengths of time in captivity or varying conditions of captivity. Some may have been held in forests, caves, deserts, ships, holes in the ground, prison cells or breeze block rooms. Others might have experienced physical or psychological torture, starvation, deprivation, sexual and physical abuse, or they may have witnessed extreme brutality and death.

The one thing in common is survival.

What happened can never be undone; you can't turn back time, although time will allow space between the trauma and your future life, when the intensity of the event should subside and become more manageable.

Rebuilding your life is important and can take time, energy, and commitment. Go at your own pace and in your own way. Many former hostages have found trauma therapy or specialist counselling helpful, though be aware that the therapy itself can be distressing and tiring. However, over time individuals find that their distress and tiredness will begin to ease as they build a rapport and trust with their counsellor.

Part of your 'rebuilding' is to reintegrate back into society. Some have found this easy while others have found it more challenging. Anyone who has been through a traumatic experience, such as a kidnap or detention, will respond and react in different ways depending on the circumstances around their being held, their natural resilience, emotional strength, and personal support network. Be patient and kind to yourself.

INITIAL RELEASE AND DEBRIEFS

There is usually a period of 'decompression' and sometimes a formal debrief immediately following your release. The debrief should be conducted by experts and you may wish to be supported by a trauma specialist. Where the debrief is conducted by the police or government, the aim is to give you a period of readjustment and gather evidence for any on-going investigation while it is still fresh in your mind. You may be expected to recount the experience you have been through which may cause further distress.

Depending on the circumstances around your kidnap, or detention, there may also be further debriefs or interviews following your release.

Tips for your debrief:

- Take it at your own pace and ask to take a break when you feel the need;
- If you need support or wish to be accompanied by a family member or friend, ask if this is possible at the outset;
- Even if family or friends are not allowed to accompany you, you do not have to feel isolated from them and can ask to have contact with them during the debrief;
- Ensure you feel comfortable with the person who is carrying out the debrief and, if not, ask for them to be changed.

The debrief may feel as if you are still in some form of captivity; you may be in a safe house, rather than at home, with limited access to your loved ones. Some former hostages

have described this period as being 'surreal' and have experienced many emotions, such as wondering if they have even been released, being overwhelmed by the attention, or feeling guilty if they have had to leave other hostages behind.

You could be asked to participate in several different 'debriefs' depending on who was involved in your case or release, such as government officials, police, your employers, lawyers or other advisers. They will have their own agendas - for example to gain evidence or lessons learned for future cases - and may want to move quickly.

Debriefs can be both exhausting and challenging because you will be reliving the trauma you have experienced. However, some former hostages have found the process to have a therapeutic effect and have recognised the debrief as the start of their rehabilitation.

REUNITING WITH LOVED ONES

Being kidnapped, or being taken captive, is a traumatic experience for everyone including family members and friends. Loved ones may find it hard to acknowledge and understand what you have lived through.

Arriving home can be an overwhelming time where you may experience a tide of sympathy, and many offers of help and guidance. There may also be media intrusion, official enquiries, and medical appointments to attend. It can be helpful to have a trustworthy intermediary such as a family member or friend to whom your welfare is a priority. They can help filter demands and manage the situation to minimise any distress.

It is important that you give yourself time to heal and gradually come to terms with your experiences.

COMMON REACTIONS & HEALTH-RELATED ISSUES

No matter how long you were held for, you may experience a range of emotions and reactions. You may find it difficult to process conversations and to retain information, or you may find it hard to show your emotions - finding yourself shutting down into the mindset you adopted during captivity.

You may not notice this, as you will be trying to return to 'normal' as quickly as possible, but family and friends may notice, so listen to them and trust their judgement.

Reactions such as sleep disturbance, flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts about what happened, hyper-vigilance, heightened emotions (eg. crying more than normal or feeling angry) or trying to avoid doing things potentially associated with what has happened are also common.

Psychological reactions can include:

- Shock, numbness and denial
- Fear and anxiety
- Helplessness and hopelessness
- Anger
- Guilt and shame
- Confusion and disorientation
- Impaired concentration, memory and decision making
- Social withdrawal
- Mental and behavioural avoidance.

Physical reactions can include:

- Tiredness
- Headaches
- Chest pains, shakiness, and trembling
- Tension and muscular aches
- Insomnia, tiredness, and fatigue
- Poor concentration and forgetfulness
- Palpitations, shallow rapid breathing, and dizziness
- Nausea and vomiting.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

If you haven't been offered a full medical examination when you are released, make an appointment with your family doctor, and ask for a thorough health check. This should include a physical health check including blood tests, a psychiatric assessment to support any mental health needs, and in some circumstances, referral to other specialist medical treatment. You might also want to discuss a healthy eating plan and a sensible fitness regime to bring you back to full health. Do not ignore any persisting symptoms.

There are a range of health-related issues commonly experienced by former hostages depending on their circumstances in captivity:

■ You could be malnourished, have muscle wastage if you haven't been able to exercise, or have picked up a virus or infection – possibly remaining undetected. You may have been sexually abused or physically tortured and you may have experienced long periods of isolation.

■ Tooth decay and gum disease are common where hostages have been held for longer periods of time. You should see a dentist as soon as possible.

■ If you wear glasses or contact lenses arrange to see your optician or ophthalmologist.

There are all sorts of things we do to cope with everyday stress and to help us relax, such as going for a run or having a glass of wine. In moderation, these are healthy responses for anyone, but done to excess they can become detrimental.

Keep an eye on yourself and each other – you will know if things do not feel right for you. Don't hesitate to seek help.

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS¹

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)* is the term used by mental health professionals to describe reactions that cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning in people who have experienced a traumatic event. Individuals may also experience changes in their view of the world, and of others, and sometimes this means that they can find it difficult to trust others after their experiences.

In the days following the incident, some people feel confused, distressed, and fearful or experience other emotions or reactions which can in themselves be unpleasant and worrying. Even though such reactions can seem strange, it is important to understand that these are entirely normal responses to severe stress and shock.

Most people are affected in some way when they are exposed to a traumatic event, but their reactions do not last long and are not too distressing. Within days or weeks, most people feel as if they are back to how they were and getting on with their lives. But for some people, reactions can be more distressing and longer lasting or may suddenly arise months or even years later.

If you find your symptoms persist or worsen, please seek further help. If necessary, Hostage International can support you in finding specialist trauma support.

¹ From Post Traumatic Stress – the facts, by Stephen Regel and Stephen Joseph (2nd edit OUP 2017)

REBUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOVED ONES

Rebuilding your life with family and friends will be a new experience for all of you and sometimes your family will not know the best way to support you, nor what to say or what to do. At times it may be necessary to insist on some down time to process your feelings. What might be helpful for you might be unhelpful for your family – and the other way round. Relationships may change because of the traumatic experience you have been through.

You may find that you need extra support renegotiating your relationships; you have been forced apart under extraordinary circumstances and you may all have changed. Your trauma will have extended to your family and their reactions may surprise you. Some may want to try to understand your experience while others may not. It is beneficial if you can all share your

experiences. However, you may not want to, and your family may be afraid to ask for fear of upsetting you. Some hostages have never spoken in depth to their family or friends about their experience, as it can be a very painful and emotive subject for them and for you. Try to be patient and understanding with each other.

For those with children, you may experience some resentment from them because you have not been around; you may have missed their birthdays or special holidays. These are natural feelings, which need to be recognised and can be worked through.

You don't have to go through this alone. If you, or your loved ones, feel the need to speak to someone independent, Hostage International can help.

RETURNING TO WORK

Many returning hostages struggle to know when, how, or if to return to work. Some may want or need a long period of rehabilitation, while others might want to go back to work straight away. This is a personal choice, and everyone is different. Pace yourself and take notice of how you feel mentally and physically.

You could be faced with numerous decisions and find them hard to navigate. If you need help in your return to work, Hostage International can provide support.

Read more about returning to work in our guide available at:

www.hostageinternational.org

SUGGESTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Accessing and accepting support from others

It is comforting to receive physical and emotional support from others; you don't have to appear strong or try to cope by yourself and there is no shame in accepting help. You have been through a life changing experience and to move on in your life you need to understand the trauma.

Talking with others who have had similar experiences or who understand what you have been through is particularly important.

Hostage International can help

We have a team of trained caseworkers, some with personal experience of being a hostage or of a loved one having been taken, and we can also facilitate access to trauma specialists. Talking with friends or family can sometimes be challenging; they will want to help but will not necessarily understand what you have been through and will be reluctant to upset you. Try to accept that some family members may not or cannot engage with your on-going experience of trauma.

Taking time out for yourself

Some people may find it necessary at times to be alone – you may need time to be alone with your thoughts to process or reflect on what you have been through. This is okay and your alone time should be respected.

Confronting what has happened

Confronting the reality of the situation may help you come to terms with the event. Some will feel that their old life has been lost and cannot be retrieved and will grieve for it. The kidnap or detention may mean that you cannot return to a country you thought of as your home. Try to adopt your own way of working through your experience and seek help if you need it.

Keeping routines and staying active

Helping others, keeping busy, engaging in previously enjoyed or new activities and maintaining a routine

can all give some temporary relief. It is well documented that physical activity is beneficial to our mental health. Walking is a really good way to keep fit. Even if you don't feel like it, aim to go out if only for 10-20 minutes each day.

Look for post-traumatic growth

Often, as people begin to recover from trauma, they notice that they view life in a different way; you may find that you appreciate your family and friends in a new way, and you begin to recognise changes within yourself.

Typical examples of post-traumatic growth:

- **Relationships are enhanced in some way** – valuing friends and family more, feeling increased compassion and kindness for others;
- **Challenging views of oneself** – having a greater sense of personal resilience, wisdom and strength

coupled with a greater acceptance of vulnerabilities and strengths;

- **Changes in life philosophy** – shifts in understanding of what really matters, finding a fresh appreciation of each new day, possible changes in spiritual beliefs.

Some dos and don'ts to remember

Do:

- Express your emotions: take the opportunity to review the experience within yourself and with others and let your family share your experience (should they want to).
- Express your needs clearly and honestly to your family and friends and with colleagues or managers at work.
- Take time out to sleep, rest, think and be with your close family and friends.
- Try to keep your life as normal as possible after the initial distress.

■ Be prepared for the long haul. Most hostages experience an emotional rollercoaster for at least the first year; learn to ride it and the emotions, even when frightening.

Don't:

■ Expect too much of yourself: set yourself no more than one or two tasks or objectives a day to begin with.

■ Bottle up feelings, avoid talking about what has happened or let embarrassment stop you giving others the chance to talk.

■ Expect the memories to go away quickly; they may stay with you for some time.

■ Make plans for the first six weeks or take any major decisions for the first six months.

■ Be frightened by your memories. You will build a new life for yourself and your family and, in time, your life will become easier. Your experience

will become a memory that you will have control over. There will be times when these memories are triggered by a sound, a smell or an image; this is natural and to be expected. Hopefully in time your responses to such triggers will be more manageable and you can learn to control them.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Resources from Hostage International can be found on our website:

www.hostageinternational.org/resources

- Returning to work
- Handling the media and social media - a guide for families and former hostages

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS:

Jude Tebbutt is a trustee on the board of Hostage International, and was formerly a social worker in a psychiatric hospital. On 11 September 2011, Jude was taken hostage by Somali pirates while she and her husband were travelling on the Kenyan coast. David was killed in the kidnap, and Jude was taken hostage and kept in solitary confinement for six months.

Jude says: “I would like to thank all those former hostages and professionals who have helped put this guide together and I hope that it will go some way to helping you navigate your way from captivity to a new future.”

Nick Hitch is a volunteer adviser and caseworker at Hostage International. He is now retired after 36 years working in oil and gas projects. On 16 January 2013 he was working at the In Amenas gas plant in the Algerian

Sahara when it was attacked at dawn by al-Qaeda terrorists. Nick was taken hostage and held for 36 hours and seriously injured by a vehicle IED (improvised explosive device) but escaped. Forty colleagues died as security forces re-established control.

Nick says: “We all respond differently to trauma, but I hope that the collected experience of several former hostages is helpful in guiding others walking the road to recovery.”

Rob Jesty is a volunteer adviser to Hostage International and doctor. He was taken hostage with his then girlfriend, now wife, Beth, in the Democratic Republic of Congo in May 2018.”

Rob says: “I hope this guide provides support as you experience some initial emotions immediately after a hostage experience and during the days, weeks and months that follow.”

This guide has been written by and for former hostages with additional information provided by trauma experts. It has been compiled with the understanding that each situation is different, everyone affected is individual, and that there are a range of outcomes and reactions that will differ depending on each person's situation and life experience. This document is for guidance only.



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