



Taken hostage

How should an organisation respond to the needs of hostages and their families during and after a kidnapping? Peter Rudge and Stephen Regel explain why employers must plan and train staff to deal with a kidnap crisis

At the time of writing, the kidnap and murder of the American photojournalists, James Foley and Stephen Sotloff, and British aid-workers, David Haines and Alan Henning, are dominating the world's headlines and fears are rising for many other foreign hostages held in the Middle East. Many Western kidnap victims will be those working for multinational industries, journalists, staff and personnel from foreign consulates, and foreign nationals caught up in any ongoing political crisis or merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. In addition, aid workers who were once deemed 'off limits' are no longer safe from kidnapping as multiple recent events have demonstrated. Tragically, some abductions will also end in the murder of the hostage.

The last two decades have seen the continued and frequent use of kidnapping, both for political and financial motives. Kidnapping in areas such as the Middle East, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan have all been reported. Many will remember the high profile kidnapping of Terry Waite, the Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy, in 1987 in Lebanon, not to mention the abduction of the journalist John McCarthy and the lecturer Brian Keenan around the same time. There were of course many others, but these particular individuals have stayed in the public consciousness because they wrote eloquently about their experiences and the impact this subsequently had on their lives^{1,2}.

The psychological impact of being held hostage has been well documented, through both personal accounts and in the academic literature³. Whilst there have been studies on groups of hostages, much of our knowledge is based on the impact on individual, often high profile, cases. The research on the impact on families is sparse, however.

Given the paucity of the research, this article will explore some of the issues that arise for individuals and families, and discuss how sensitive and proactive organisational

responses can make a difference in helping and supporting the kidnap survivor and their families come to terms with their experience. Both the authors are closely involved with the charity Hostage and have experience of delivering direct support to hostage families, also outlined briefly here.

Effects on the individual

As with any traumatic event, the impact of being taken hostage will to a great extent need to take into account a number of factors, including the duration; the nature of any assault on the abducted, whether it be psychological, physical or sexual; any subjective life threat ie did the individual feel at any point that they were going to die; whether the experience was endured alone or as part of a group; the behaviour of the perpetrators; and the whole meaning of the experience for the individual, which will of course determine their psychological trajectory over time. Individual reactions to being taken hostage will include many of the following:

- shock, numbness and denial
- fear and anxiety
- helplessness and hopelessness
- anger and hostility
- guilt
- confusion and disorientation
- impaired concentration, memory and decision-making
- social withdrawal, and
- mental and behavioural avoidance.

All these reactions may be phasic or prolonged, depending on individual circumstances³.

Family reactions and responses

The first reaction of the families and friends of a kidnapped person is inevitably a mixture of fear, anxiety and helplessness that can rapidly degenerate into frustration and anger if the recovery process is slow or seems to be non-existent. And in many cases the recovery process is both a slow and torturous one.



Dealing with this early stage requires a great deal of tact, patience and know-how to avoid making a difficult situation even worse. It is often a family's coping and problem-solving strategies such as their communication, support and flexibility that help a family to cope in a crisis⁵.

An organisational response – the first days and weeks following abduction

The organisation needs to have three key objectives in relation to the families:

- to alleviate their suffering
- to maintain their trust, and
- to maintain the organisation's operational effectiveness.

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The consequences of failure can result in a family ceasing to cooperate with the organisation, seeking their own solution to the problem, engaging in their own media campaigns or blaming the organisation for negative outcomes. Even in the case of a positive outcome, a family who feel they have not been treated properly can pose problems for the organisation.

In the wake of a kidnapping, a family in a state of acute distress can find themselves meeting the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials, the Police, insurers, private security companies and of course their loved one's employer. This can be a bewildering array of individuals who, despite their best and valid intentions to help, can overwhelm a family that has been suddenly projected into a world of ongoing traumatic stress.

A family contact

Given the chaotic situation into which families are projected, it is vitally important that as a first step, a consistent organisational point of contact is identified. This can of course be one or two individuals who can provide consistent support throughout.

Our experience has shown that families often need a fast response to be confident that their anxieties will be addressed. The key contact needs to be available to families 24/7 and the reliability of this contact is vital. We've seen a family's relationship with an organisation experience a catastrophic breakdown of trust over something as simple as a missed phone call followed by a weak excuse. Once that trust has gone, the organisation faces an uphill battle to rebuild it.

Families above all else want information. In a world that is so reliant on the media, social networking and other virtual communication, information can be accessed from a variety of sources, many of which are of dubious provenance with the potential to misinform, confuse and raise unnecessary anxiety. Organisations need to be ready and able to present as much information as possible to the family. There may be areas that cannot be discussed for reasons of operational security, but it is best to be honest with the family and explain what can and cannot be

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disclosed, with an explanation and rationale as to why this is the case.

We would recommend that organisations bring in someone at the top level to reassure families that the organisation is taking responsibility and action. Whoever that senior person is, they need to be aware of their responsibilities and the potential pitfalls when they communicate with a family.

Professional characteristics

Supporting individuals and families exposed to the trauma of having a family member abducted and held hostage has the potential to be an emotionally challenging experience. Whoever provides that support will be dealing, albeit second-hand, with chaotic and potentially violent situations with no guarantee of a satisfactory outcome. Individuals identified for this role need to be able to:

- be a patient, empathic and active listener
- deliver difficult news clearly and without evasion
- gather information effectively and sensitively
- project and maintain calm; panic is contagious and it can be all too easy to be influenced by the emotion generated by the family
- be prepared for repetitive contact; an organisation's frequency of contact with a family can fall away when there is no fresh news. This is when there is a vital need for regular contact, even if nothing is happening
- provide critical thinking and clarity to help the family be clear about the situation they and their loved one are caught up in and help them understand the decisions that they will face, and
- cope with and understand the complex emotional presentations they will encounter under stress, as families frequently fragment.

Whoever carries out this role needs training and preparation and should not be 'drafted in' as the crisis unfolds. They must also understand the mechanics of kidnap situations and the language of the FCO, the Police and private security companies. These are the things that the family will want to talk about. If the person providing this support doesn't understand those mechanics and cannot talk about them knowledgeably, then trust will be eroded. They also need to be able to bring themselves up to speed on the geographical area and situation-specific details. Political literacy should be part of the knowledge base if at all possible.

Practical support

It can be the little things that cause families further stress and anxiety. Having a family member kidnapped may throw up all sorts of odd and seemingly petty situations. For example, if the car insurance is in the name of the kidnapped party, then a road traffic collision may lead to an impasse, or the family may be unable to access bank accounts or savings. Families accessing their insurance company and banks, via call-centres, discover that there isn't a drop-down box for 'policy or account-holder



kidnapped'. Organisations also need to be aware that it is sometimes small, previously routine things that affect a family's equilibrium, and so consideration of what can be done to help will pay dividends in terms of trust.

The work of Hostage

Hostage (previously known as Hostage UK) is an independent charity that provides pastoral care and practical support to hostages and their families internationally, during and after a kidnap. The charity was founded by a group of former hostages and their family members who wanted to ensure that anyone going through a kidnap had access to the specialist care and support they need, free of charge.

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For illustration purposes; posed by models

Hostage is not involved in operational responses to kidnap crises and can't help to bring hostages back, but it can provide the support and advice to make a difficult situation more bearable. Hostage also provides education and training for organisations to help them to improve the support they can provide to families, colleagues and returning hostages. Hostage advocates publicly and privately for the needs of hostages and their families, improving the care and support offered by the Government, Police, statutory agencies, employers, the health service and a range of other organisations.

Delivered independently of any outside interests, Hostage has a team of responders, who are available on a 24/7 basis through a telephone hotline. All of the responders have personal experience of kidnapping, whether as former hostages, as family members of former hostages or from their previous professional involvement in hostage situations.

The responders are also able to put families in touch with Hostage's second level of support, as required. The organisation's principal advisors, who have the expertise in working with trauma survivors, deliver this second level of support, which includes:

Providing support from specialists in psychological trauma

Returning hostages or the families affected by their abduction will experience a range of reactions characteristic of post-traumatic stress. Some indeed may go on to develop trauma symptoms which may benefit from formal therapy at some stage, but it should be noted that information, advice and guidance is important in the early stages for families and that this should be structured and consistent.

Therapists providing this support should be experienced in acute presentations of trauma and crisis and working with traumatic bereavement. The main focus with families and individual family members should be based on structured social support, rather than conventional trauma-focused therapy, whatever the psychotherapeutic orientation of the therapist. Studies on coping with trauma have also found that problem-solving strategies and finding meaning to the traumatic event are associated with the absence of longer-term trauma symptoms and PTSD⁶.

Health professionals

Returning hostages who may have been held in challenging physical conditions may benefit from a comprehensive medical check-up. Hostage can help to secure this medical attention.

Media advice

Management of the media is often a requirement for families going through a kidnap experience and can be one of its most stressful facets. Families may well receive conflicting advice as to the stance they take with regard to the media. Hostage can provide advice on the risks, potential benefits and the consequences of a family's chosen approach, though all decisions must ultimately rest with the family.

Financial advice

A kidnap crisis can put financial pressure on a family, particularly if the main breadwinner has been taken hostage. Hostage can help to explain the situation to HMRC, banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions to ensure that they respond in the most sympathetic way possible.

Hostage acknowledges that payment of ransoms in some circumstances is illegal, and advises families of this. But the organisation does not take a stance on the ethical question of payment beyond the legalities – we recognise families have very difficult decisions to make and we provide support from a non-judgmental position.

Support for children

Hostage has access to trauma therapists who can guide parents through the challenges they may face with handling their children's reactions. On our own policy, we only support young people over the age of 16 directly and with the consent of their parent or guardian.

Closing thoughts

A kidnap crisis is fast-moving, chaotic and unpredictable. It is one of the most challenging situations that an organisation can face. A vital part of the crisis management plan must be to support the family of the hostage appropriately. The objective isn't only to alleviate the family's suffering. A family left unsupported can negatively affect the organisation's operational response to the kidnap and pose problems afterwards, whether or not the kidnap is resolved successfully.

It takes a multifaceted and structured response to effectively support a family through a kidnap. Many of the elements necessary to put that structure in place may already be available through an organisation's health insurance policies or through their human resources function. Other elements, such as the vital organisational point of contact, need to be selected and trained for the task in advance. An organisation must know what it does and doesn't have access to before the crisis hits. It needs to have the right people trained and ready to go when the moment comes and a plan in place. There won't be time to build that structure or develop that plan once a kidnap has happened.

References

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Peter Rudge is the Vice-Chairman of Hostage and is directly involved in providing support to families involved in kidnapping incidents. Prior to that he was an official in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and was himself kidnapped in 2007 by separatist rebels in the Danakil Depression area of Northern Ethiopia.
www.hostageuk.org



Stephen Regel is Director of the Centre for Trauma, Resilience and Growth, Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, and Honorary Professor in the School of Education, Nottingham University. He has over 30 years' experience working with trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and workplace post trauma support. He was appointed an OBE in 2013 for services to victims of trauma. He is also one of Hostage's Principal Advisors.
stephen.regel@nottshc.nhs.uk

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