



HOSTAGE UK

A family's guide to coping during a kidnapping

Having a family member kidnapped can be a frightening experience. You will need support, information and advice.

This guide offers practical pointers on how to cope and where to look for further information.

It is aimed at UK-based families of British hostages taken overseas, but some things are relevant in other cases.

Each kidnap is different and each family's needs are unique.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach and this document is for guidance only.

I have just been informed about the kidnap or suspect that someone has been kidnapped – what should I do next?

Although it might feel difficult, try to stay calm.

You might want to appoint one member of your family to act as a single point of contact. This would usually be the hostage's next of kin, but you can nominate someone else if you prefer.

Start a notebook to record all the information you receive. This will ensure you don't lose anything, and is an easy way to share information with family and friends.

Who do I need to contact?

If the authorities are not aware of the kidnap, contact the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. If they are, you don't need to rush to inform anyone else.

If you have been informed by the Police or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), you can assume that all relevant authorities are aware and you don't need to rush to tell anyone else. If you are not sure, get in touch with the FCO (contacts below). If the Police are involved, they may appoint a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) at the request of the FCO but this doesn't happen in all cases.

Make a list of family and friends who need to be informed and kept up-to-date. Include their contact details and keep it by the phone or computer so it is close to hand whenever you need it. Make clear that they should not pass on any information or speak to the media without your permission. Any media enquiries should be re-directed to you or whoever is handling the media in your case.

Others you may need to notify include: the hostage's employer; the employers of family members who may need support or compassionate leave; children's schools and your local GP. Hostage UK can advise on whether you need to inform other organisations, such as banks, insurers, and mobile phone providers.

What can I expect from those handling the kidnap response?

Each case is different so there is no standard response.

If the FCO is handling the kidnap response, they will assign a case worker who will remain in contact with you, usually by telephone. You can also request face-to-face meetings which will take place at their offices in London and Hostage UK can attend these meetings with you if you wish. The FCO might request that your local police force assign an FLO to liaise with you, but this doesn't happen in all cases.

If the FCO is not handling the kidnap – this might happen when the hostage's employer appoints a security company to handle negotiations – it can still assign a case worker. They can provide some information and advise on media or emergency travel.

If you are not happy with anything – say so. Hostage UK can assist if you would rather not do this yourself. We are independent, and treat all information we receive with sensitivity.

Try to record all information in your notebook – this can help you remember things and make it easier to share information with family and friends. If you would like any information to be repeated, don't be afraid to ask.

It is not unusual for families to feel suspicious of the intentions of those handling the kidnap response from time to time. Information is patchy and you might worry you are being kept in the dark. You might also wonder whether other interests are being put before the release of the hostage. Be honest about your concerns, and Hostage UK can also assist.

What information will they need from me?

You will be asked to provide a number of things, none of which should cause alarm.

You are likely to be asked to provide a DNA sample from the hostage – this is standard practice and does not mean they have come to any harm. You will also be asked for a recent photo. This might be used later for the media – but only with your permission. Try to find a personal photo rather than a passport-style one. Also make sure the photo is not 'unhelpful'. For example, don't choose one that might be perceived as offensive to the kidnappers – those that show the hostage drinking alcohol, dressing immodestly, or showing an allegiance to a particular religious faith or political cause. Avoid photos that imply military links. The FCO and Hostage UK can assist.

You will be asked to answer a series of 'proof of life' questions that only the hostage would be able to answer. These help the negotiators to confirm they are talking to the right people and that the hostage is still alive and well. You might also be asked a number of questions relating to the hostage's health, life experiences and financial situation.

What kinds of emotions am I likely to experience during the kidnap?

This is a frightening experience but there are ways to cope.

At different times you may feel confused, isolated, or anxious. You might feel guilty that life must go on as normal without the hostage and that you can't do more to help. You might also have trouble sleeping, lose your appetite, or become listless and disinterested in what's happening around you. Families can find themselves under a lot of internal pressure – keep communication channels open and try to be honest about how you are feeling.

Hostage UK can offer support from specialists who understand the unique needs of families during a kidnap. And remember that your GP is there to offer help and support and may be able to refer you to specialist help. It's also important to try to maintain a regular daily routine.

What about the children?

It is important that children get the support they need.

Children react differently – some retreat into their own world to protect themselves, while others want to be more actively involved. Much will depend on their age and emotional maturity. It is especially important for children that they have a routine, and that they are protected from any media interest. You should ensure you inform their school so they are aware of the additional support needs.

Hostage UK can advise on how to support children and can put you in touch with other families that have been through a similar experience.

What kind of support is available for me?

It is vital that the family gets the right support, too, both from specialists and also from family and friends.

You might feel guilty about asking for support while the hostage is being held – but it is vital that you get help, too. Most former hostages admit that the experience is worse for their families who have the constant worry of the unknown.

Some kidnappings are safely resolved quickly, but others take longer. You might go for long periods without receiving information. Try not to lose heart. You might hear rumours that worry you via the media, Internet or social media. You should be cautious about anything until you have proof that it is accurate.

Hostage UK can put you in touch with other families of former hostages.

We can also identify specialist help from psychologists and psychiatrists, media experts, lawyers, financial advisors, debt counsellors, tax specialists and other professionals who can give some time free of charge.

Your local GP might be able to refer you to specialist support and community groups can also help.

Don't forget your family and friends – consider allowing trusted, reliable, and level-headed people to act as 'gatekeepers' for enquiries to take the pressure off you. Or allocate them areas of responsibility, such as background information gathering, fielding phone calls,

and keeping a news log. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Should I speak to the media?

Each case is different and the media should always be approached with caution.

Each kidnap is unique and there is therefore no 'standard' approach to the media. In some cases they can play a useful role, but in others a media silence will be advisable. Hostage UK does not advise on media strategy, but we can help with general thoughts and refer you to professionals who can help.

Some families have been contacted by individuals who wish to become involved in the case, either for personal gain or because they have psychological problems. If you are concerned about any individual, discuss it with whoever is handling the kidnap response or ask Hostage UK for help.

Hostage UK has produced a guide for families on handling the media and social media during a kidnap, which you will find on our website.

What about social media?

You need to think carefully about using social media during a kidnap.

As soon as you learn about the kidnapping, consider closing the social media accounts of the hostage and immediate family members. At the very least, reset privacy settings to limit the number of people that can get access to photos and comments on these accounts. Hostage UK and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office can help you to do this.

In doing this, don't forget LinkedIn profiles, which might contain information that could be harmful, such as military connections, affiliations with certain organisations, and might imply the hostage or their family is wealthy or influential.

Families have also been victims of cyber bullying on social media. This can be very distressing. If this happens to you, contact the Foreign & Commonwealth Office or Hostage UK for assistance. In some cases, cyber bullying should be referred to the police.

Due to the speed of social media, you might hear about new developments in the kidnapping via that route rather than from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office or the hostage's employer.

Many families monitor social media and the Internet for news about the hostage, the group holding them or the country where they have been taken. This is understandable. However, given the amount of information it can become overwhelming. It might be advisable to give yourself 'time out' from the Internet and social media each day.

What can I do to help?

The most important thing you can do to support the hostage is survive the situation yourself.

There are a number of practical things you can do during a kidnap. Keep a family or personal diary, which will help you to order your thoughts. It can also help the hostage to understand what has happened while they were away. Keep a folder of press clippings about the kidnapping for the hostage to read when they come home.

In some cases it is possible to get letters or messages to the hostage. Former hostages have said these are important in keeping them going during the kidnap. It is usually best to write these under guidance from whoever is handling the kidnap response to ensure they do not undermine the negotiations or overall strategy.

In some cases, a public show of support can help with negotiations and can be reassuring for hostages should they hear about it. In some cases, you will be advised to avoid publicity for the sake of the hostage, so you will need to take advice on this.

It is quite common for families to want to travel to the country where the hostage is being held (if known). Hostage UK strongly advises against this unless you are advised to do so by those handling the negotiations. You will be putting yourself at risk, you may detract from efforts to secure the hostage's release, and there will be psychological and health risks, too.

Should I pay a ransom?

Hostage UK does not offer advice on the payment of ransoms, but we recognise this can be a very difficult decision for a family to make.

Many governments – like the UK – have a policy of not making substantive concessions to hostage takers. If you decide to pay a ransom, there will be safety risks and logistical challenges. There is also the danger that you will be the victim of a 'double dip', where a second ransom is demanded after the first has been paid. The payment of ransoms is illegal in some countries, so by paying you may be breaking the law in that country. If the kidnappers are deemed to be 'terrorists' you might also be subject to investigation in relation to laws covering the financing of terrorism.

What happens when the hostage returns?

When the hostage returns, there will be immediate relief and joy. But adjusting to life together again can be difficult.

Up until this point, all your energy will have been focused on getting the hostage home safely and surviving the experience. Once they are home, it will take time to adjust. You should also bear in mind that your loved one may be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is an anxiety disorder caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events. PTSD is treatable with the correct expert help. Hostage UK can put you in touch with someone who can help.

There are a number of potential issues that you should look out for. The hostage and the family can have problems connecting because they have been through such different ordeals. As a result, you might find it hard to support one another and feel detached.

The hostage may suffer extreme guilt at having put their family through the ordeal, and the family might also feel guilty for having to get on with life 'as normal' throughout the kidnap. The hostage might also blame their family, and feel you did not do enough to secure their release. This can be incredibly hurtful, but you need to understand it is one of a number of normal reactions and is a symptom of what they have been through.

There might be practical problems caused by the change in roles that might have occurred. For instance, men who have been kidnapped sometimes find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that their wife has taken on the role of 'head of household' in their absence, and this can cause friction and some readjustment. And old problems that were present before the kidnap will not have gone away, and might resurface.

Above all, do not try to rush the return process. After a prolonged absence, returning to normal relationships can take time. Be patient, take life day by day and do not be disappointed if life does not return to normal in the first few weeks.

Hostage UK has produced a guide on reintegration for returning hostages and their families, which is on our website.

What if the hostage is a child?

Child hostages will need specialist support.

If the hostage is a child, they should be seen by a specialist in child or adolescent psychology or psychiatry as a precaution. A child's adverse reactions may be delayed quite considerably from the time of the abduction. Younger children do not display the same post-traumatic reactions as adults; they tend to express their distress through play and behavioural problems. Their reactions tend to be worse if the abduction was conducted by a trusted figure.

What if things do not end positively?

We always hope for a good outcome, but this does not always happen.

Whilst you should always believe in and hope for a successful outcome, not all kidnappings have a happy ending. Should this happen, Hostage UK will be there to offer support as you come to terms with events. In some cases, families are left without any conclusion to the case at all, but this is relatively rare.

Contacts and sources of information

Foreign and Commonwealth Office: call 020 7008 1500 (24/7 phone line) and ask to be put through to the Special Cases Unit.

The Foreign Office's Consular Directorate has a website which offers travel advice by country:

<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>

The CIA World Fact Book is a good source of social, economic and political information about every country:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

The US State Department has up-to-date information about every country:

www.state.gov/countries/

Hostage UK keeps an up-dated reading list of books, reports and guides on its website:

<http://www.hostageuk.org/resources/>

Hostage UK has a wealth of experience, but we are always learning. We would appreciate your feedback so we can continue to improve the support and advice we provide.

Please send your comments and experiences to **administrator@hostageuk.org**

Hostage UK has also produced a guide 'Handling the media and social media' and 'A life after captivity: reintegration guide', both are available on our website.

Hostage UK has a strict privacy policy; any information you provide will not be shared with anyone without your permission.

For more information about Hostage UK or to find out how we can help, please visit our website: **www.hostageuk.org**

This information is provided for guidance only.

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