

# COPING DURING A KIDNAPPING

A Family's Guide

HOSTAGE INTERNATIONAL



**HOSTAGE**



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**I HAVE JUST BEEN INFORMED ABOUT A KIDNAP OR  
SUSPECT THAT SOMEONE HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED –  
WHAT SHOULD I DO NEXT?**

## **ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT BE 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, YOU SHOULD CONTACT THEM

If you have been informed by the police or other authorities responsible for handling kidnap cases, you can assume that all relevant authorities are aware.

If you are not sure, get in touch with the relevant government body that deals with kidnapping abroad. In the UK, this would be the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), in Australia it is the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and in Canada it is Global Affairs Canada. If you are unsure who to contact, Hostage International will be able to help identify the correct channels. In some cases, the police may appoint a family liaison officer, but this doesn't happen in all cases.

You should also inform the hostage's employers, where applicable, as they will likely have kidnap response procedures to follow in the event of a kidnapped employee. It is also possible that the kidnappers will contact the employers in the first instance, so it is important that

employers are aware of the incident. You should also let them know who the family point of contact is, so they can keep you informed.

Make a list of family and friends who you think need to be informed and updated. Include their contact details and keep the list 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 employers of family members who may need support or compassionate leave; children's schools and your local family doctor. Hostage International 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

Some kidnaps are resolved quickly, but others take longer. Whatever the case, and whoever is handling the response, you have a right, as the family of the hostage, to be kept informed. While you should not expect to be given sensitive or classified information from those dealing with the kidnap response, you can expect regular updates. If there is new information which might go public, you might be informed before it becomes public knowledge, but given the speed of social media this is not always possible. Sometimes, there will be no news and you might go for long periods without receiving information. Try not to lose heart.

If the authorities are handling the kidnap response, they will usually assign a case worker who will remain in contact with you, usually by telephone. You can also request face-to-face meetings which may take place at their offices, in your home, or another location. In addition, the authorities may assign a member of the police force to liaise with you, but this doesn't happen in all cases.

If the employers are handling the kidnap response, they may involve specialist kidnap-for-ransom advisers. The employers should keep you informed of progress in the resolution of the kidnap, and normally appoint a member of staff to liaise with you.

If you are not happy with the interaction with either the authorities or the employers, let them know. 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 or that other interests are being put before the release of the hostage. Be honest about your concerns, and Hostage International can assist. As an independent body, we will listen to your concerns and treat all information with sensitivity.

**WHAT INFORMATION WILL THOSE HANDLING THE  
KIDNAP RESPONSE NEED FROM ME?**

## YOU WILL BE ASKED TO PROVIDE A NUMBER OF THINGS, NONE OF WHICH SHOULD CAUSE ALARM

You may be asked to provide any of the following:

- A DNA sample from the hostage - this is standard practice and does not mean they have come to any harm.

- A recent photo of the hostage. 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.

- A series of ‘proof of life’ questions that only the hostage would be able to answer. These questions help those negotiating 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 WILL HELP ME TO COPE DURING THE KIDNAP?

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. You might feel embarrassed about asking for support while the hostage is being held - but it is vital that you get help too. Many former hostages admit that the experience can be worse for their families who have the constant worry of the unknown.

Things you can do to cope:

- Try to keep a regular routine. For example, eat proper meals at regular times and take exercise regularly, if this is what you are used to doing.
- Keep a family or personal diary to help you order your thoughts. It can also be helpful to the hostage upon returning home 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.
- Try to record all information received from the authorities or employers or any

## THIS IS A FRIGHTENING EXPERIENCE BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO COPE

other source in a notebook - this can help you remember things and make it easier to share information with family and friends.

■ Communicate and be honest about your feelings; it is important to have an outlet for your emotions. This might be found in talking to close friends or other members of the family and sharing your concerns. Hostage International can also act as a sounding board and provide an independent ear.

■ Consider allowing trusted, reliable, and level-headed people - family or friends - to act as 'gatekeepers' for enquiries to take pressure off you. Or allocate them areas of responsibility, such as background information gathering, fielding phone calls, and keeping a news log.

■ Treat media coverage with caution: 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.

Your family doctor may also be able to offer advice around daily coping mechanisms and refer you to specialist help when required.

Many individuals also find support through their community groups.

Finally, Hostage International offers dedicated support from individuals who understand the unique needs of families during a kidnap. If you have a dedicated Hostage International case worker, they will act as a constant and independent point of contact throughout the incident.

They can also put you in touch with other families of former hostages who understand what you are going through.

Depending on where you are based, Hostage International may be able to identify specialist help from psychologists and psychiatrists, media experts, lawyers, financial advisors, debt counsellors, tax specialists and other professionals who can give some assistance free of charge.

**WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?**

## **IT IS IMPORTANT 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 to have a routine and to be protected from any media interest. You should inform the child's school so they are aware of any additional support needs. However, schools must be asked to treat the information about the kidnap in confidence.

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

Hostage International has produced a guide for families on supporting children during a kidnap, which you can find on our website.

**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 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 International does not advise on media strategy, but we can help with general thoughts and refer you to professionals who can help.

Hostage International has produced a guide for families on handling the media and social media during a kidnap, which you can 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, check the social media accounts of the hostage and close family members and note what information and photos they display. Seek advice from those leading on the kidnap response about any necessary changes. In some cases, it is sufficient to reset the privacy settings to limit the number of people that can access photos and comments on these accounts. In other cases, some information will need to be hidden or the account closed.

Hostage International can help you to do this.

Don't forget LinkedIn profiles, which might contain information that could be harmful, such as military connections, affiliations with certain organisations or anything that 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 authorities or Hostage International for assistance.

Due to the speed of social media, you might hear about new developments in the kidnap incident via that route rather than from the authorities 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 in which 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

You may feel you need to be actively doing something in order to help bring the hostage home, but always think about your actions carefully. They may put you and the hostage at risk, so it is important to seek advice.

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

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.

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 best to write these under guidance from those handling the kidnap response to ensure they do not undermine the negotiations or overall strategy.

**SHOULD I PAY A RANSOM?**

## **HOSTAGE INTERNATIONAL DOES NOT OFFER ADVICE ON THE PAYMENT OF RANSOMS, BUT WE RECOGNISE THIS CAN BE A VERY DIFFICULT DECISION FOR A FAMILY**

Many governments have a policy of not making substantive concessions to hostage-takers. If you decide to pay a ransom, there will be logistical challenges and you may wish to seek professional advice. Negotiating a ransom is not a simple process and there is the danger that you will be the victim of a 'double', 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. It is therefore recommended that you seek advice on the relevant laws if you are intending to negotiate with kidnappers.

While there are a number of reputable consultancies which advise on kidnap response strategies, you should be wary of individuals who approach you unsolicited, offering help. They may 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 International for help.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE HOSTAGE RETURNS?

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.

There are a number of potential issues which may become apparent over time, and not necessarily in the first few days and weeks.

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 had 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



## **WHEN THE HOSTAGE RETURNS, THERE WILL BE IMMEDIATE RELIEF AND JOY – BUT ADJUSTING TO LIFE TOGETHER AGAIN CAN BE DIFFICULT**

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 a change in roles that might have occurred. For instance, some people who have been kidnapped find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that their partner has taken on responsibilities in the family which were previously theirs, which can cause friction and some readjustment. Any old problems that were present before the kidnap will not have gone away; they might resurface or be exacerbated.

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.

Unusual behaviour and signs of stress are normal in the first few weeks after a hostage returns home, but if these signs are acute, do not begin to fade or become worse over time, this could be an indication that your loved one is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an anxiety disorder caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events but is treatable with expert help. Hostage International can put you in touch with someone who can help.

**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 to having been kidnapped may be considerably delayed. 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**

While you should always believe in and hope for a successful outcome, not all kidnappings have a happy ending. In some cases, families are left without any conclusion to the case at all, but this is relatively rare.

Hostage International will be there to offer support as you come to terms with events.

## CONTACTS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Many governments have websites which offer travel advice, for example:

UK Foreign Office Consular Directorate: [www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice](http://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice)

Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade:

[www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au)

Government of Canada: [www.travel.gc.ca](http://www.travel.gc.ca)

Hostage International keeps an up-dated reading list of books, reports and guides on its website: [www.hostageinternational.org](http://www.hostageinternational.org)

Hostage International has also produced various support guides including: Handling the Media & Social Media, A Life After Captivity, Return to Work and a Parent's Guide - all of which are available on our website.

Hostage International 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

[info@hostageinternational.org](mailto:info@hostageinternational.org)

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

For more information about Hostage International or to find out how we can help, please visit our website: [www.hostageinternational.org](http://www.hostageinternational.org)

Hostage International is an independent charity that supports the families of hostages, during and after a kidnap, as well as returning hostages, for as long as it takes.

Contact us through our helpline **0845 608 1360**, or email the team at **[info@hostageinternational.org](mailto:info@hostageinternational.org)**

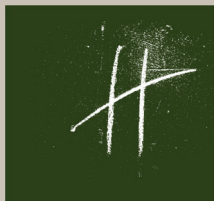
**Having a family member kidnapped can be a frightening experience. You will need support, information and advice.**

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

**It is aimed at families of hostages abducted outside of their own country, 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.**



**HOSTAGE**

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