# AMERICAN RED CROSS GUIDE FOR FAMILIES AFFECTED BY TRANSPORTATION DISASTERS



The American Red Cross, a humanitarian organization led by volunteers and guided by its Congressional Charter and the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross Movement, will provide relief to victims of disasters and help people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies.



#### INTRODUCTION

Dealing with the aftermath of an aviation or other transportation disaster can be overwhelming. This brochure is designed to help you understand your stress and grief reactions, and offer some coping strategies, and provide information to help you make the practical decisions that may be required in the next few weeks. We hope it will help you organize your thoughts and suggest tasks and details that you might otherwise overlook. The suggestions that follow may help you gather necessary information and materials. The back of this brochure has space for you to note names and telephone numbers you will need.

#### HOW THE AMERICAN RED CROSS CAN HELP

Under the provisions of the *Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996* and the *Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act of 1997*, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has designated the American Red Cross to be the "independent nonprofit organization" to provide for the emotional well-being of the families of survivors and those whose lives are lost in an aviation disaster. The American Red Cross is a nationwide organization with over 1100 chapters throughout the United States. Disaster counseling and referral services are available to you and your family members whenever the need arises — both at the disaster site and through your local Red Cross chapter. In addition to any counseling provided at the site, mental health professionals associated with your local Red Cross chapter can provide up to three counseling sessions at no cost to you or your family. If you feel that further services are appropriate to help you in your recovery, the Red Cross can help you identify a qualified mental health professional or support group in your local area.

In the case of serious injury or death, medical professionals will require photographs, medical records and dental x-rays to identify each passenger. If you arrive on site without these documents, your local Red Cross may be able to help obtain these documents and ship them to the appropriate officials. For identification purposes, a family member also may be requested to provide a DNA sample.

#### At the site

A Family Assistance Center will be established near the disaster site where you and your family members may be housed and meet directly with the representatives of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Family Assistance Team, the airline, the medical examiner or coroner, and law

enforcement agencies or other agencies, as needed. If you do not travel to the disaster site, the NTSB will help you obtain information about the accident, the identification process, and transporting your loved one to a place of your choice.

Red Cross counselors will be available to meet with you and your family at any time at the Family Assistance Center. We work closely with the NTSB to ensure that any problems that arise are dealt with in a sensitive and prompt manner. We also can act as liaisons between you and the airline if you feel your needs are not being addressed, or if you have questions or concerns you are uncomfortable discussing without a neutral third party present.

In addition to providing specially disaster-trained mental health professionals in the Family Assistance Center, the Red Cross coordinates the services of spiritual care volunteers to help with any difficult questions about faith you may have. These volunteers are available to provide individual religious services and private prayer for you and your family, if you wish, and will work with a network of religious representatives from the local community to ensure there is someone who can address your particular spiritual needs.

Professional childcare services are also available through the Red Cross. Specially screened, trained, and bonded child care workers will provide agespecific activities in a secure environment at the Family Assistance Center while parents attend briefings and meet with officials.

#### **Returning home**

If needed, your local American Red Cross chapter can meet you at the airport and assist you to get from the airport to home. Red Cross can also provide support while removing items from a home or apartment, up to three no-charge counseling sessions, and referral to support groups within your community. These services can be arranged through the American Red Cross before you leave the disaster site, or you can contact your Red Cross chapter whenever you feel the need for support. Your local chapter may make one outreach to you upon your return, but further assistance will be given only upon your request.

# COPING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF A TRANSPORTATION DISASTER

Transportation accidents are emotionally traumatic and can challenge anyone's ability to cope. As this disaster process continues the experience will wear more heavily on everyone's resources and emotions.

#### **Common reactions**

Although each person deals with serious injury and death in his or her own way, almost everyone will experience certain reactions. We have listed those that are most common to help you understand your potential responses to the tragedy, and to make you aware of how normal and expected these responses are. This list is not designed to substitute for the services provided by a mental health professional, but rather to help you understand the range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that you may experience, and to help you know when to seek professional support.

#### **Thoughts**

- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the disaster.
- Reconstructing the events surrounding the disaster in your mind.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- Questioning your spiritual beliefs.
- Repeated thoughts or memories of the disaster.

#### **Feelings**

- Feelings of outrage at the loss and the need to place blame on any and all associated with the event. This anger may be unexpectedly expressed towards your close family and friends.
- Feeling numb, withdrawn or disconnected.
- Experiencing fear and anxiety when things remind you of the event.
- Feeling a lack of involvement or enjoyment in everyday activities.
- Feeling a sense of emptiness or hopelessness about the future.

#### **Behaviors**

- Being overprotective of your safety and that of your family members.
- Isolating yourself from others.
- Becoming very alert at times, and easily startled.
- Having problems sleeping.
- Having increased conflict with family members or co-workers.

### Tips for coping with your loss

- Address problems one at a time, prioritizing for importance.
- Don't make any major decisions for at least six months, as you may not be able to make the best decision when you are dealing with so much grief.

- When you have the opportunity, allow yourself to feel the sadness and grief over what has happened. Talking to others about how you are feeling is helpful.
- Healthy practices such as eating well and getting enough sleep are especially important in time of high stress.
- Try to keep in place routines such as regular meal times and other rituals. These will help you feel a sense of order.
- Take time for yourself, and don't blame yourself or others for whatever reactions or emotions you may feel. This is a life-changing experience, and no one can expect to recover overnight.
- If you think you need legal advice, contact a reputable attorney. Take adequate time to make decisions about insurance settlements, legal actions and other matters that may have long term consequences.
- Expect strong feelings to return at the one-month, six-month, and one-year anniversaries of the disaster, as well as on special occasions and holidays. Try to spend these occasions with understanding family and friends rather than being alone.

Mourning a loss and healing the emotional wounds generally takes at least one year, and in most cases may continue for several more years. Mourning may be delayed if there are prolonged investigations, lawsuits or criminal trials. Often close friends and family may not understand your grief or your need to talk about your loss, or the time it may take for you to recover. Try to find a support group or mental health professional with a specialty in grief and loss to help you through this difficult process. If you feel your symptoms are not improving over time, and are concerned about your ability to recover, please contact the American Red Cross for a referral to a qualified mental health professional or support group.

## **Important Phone Numbers**

American		
Red Cross	Ph. #	
Airline		
Rep	Ph. #	
Name	Ph. #	

