



The De-brief Process

After a hostage or detainee returns home from captivity, they are often asked to take part in different types of de-brief; by law enforcement to gather intelligence and information to help with a prosecution or gain understanding of the group that held them; by their employer to gather lessons learned about what happened to improve policies and procedures; or to assess their post-release adjustment and build a recovery plan.

When a de-brief is conducted sensitively, many former hostages and detainees have found it to be a helpful part of their healing process. It can offer a safe space to reflect on their experiences and process what they have been through. Many are pleased to be able to contribute to efforts to bring their captors to justice or help others who continue to be held.

Based on discussions with former hostages and detainees who have been through a de-brief – with both positive and negative experiences – we consider the following to be important principles of good practice:

Preparation and forewarning

It is important that former hostages and detainees are properly prepared, understand the process, what to expect, its purpose and how it will happen in practice. After a prolonged period without choice, the de-brief process can offer an opportunity for control and choice to return at a safe pace. Discuss the de-brief process with the former hostage or detainee including the areas outlined below in the conversation. Allow them the chance to give their input on each area.

Physical environment

Where the de-brief takes place is important – a neutral space, with areas for break out and privacy. It is important to be cognizant of potential triggers for the former hostage or detainee (light/dark, open/closed, ground level/upper levels, quiet/background noise, etc.).

The de-briefer

It is important that the former hostage or detainee has the option to choose or change the person conducting the de-brief if they are unhappy. This should be made clear at the start of the de-brief process. Conducting a de-brief is a specialized activity and should not be undertaken by someone who has not been trained in what is a delicate and highly sensitive discussion.

Support from well-trained professionals



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It is important to ensure that the former hostage or detainee has access to a counselor either during the de-brief, during breaks in the de-brief, and/or following the de-brief. The

conversations will unearth difficult memories so it is desirable to have expert support on hand if possible.

Flexible process

The former hostage or detainee should be free to dictate the pace of the de-brief; there should be regular breaks, the opportunity to pause and resume another day, and the chance to physically move away from the de-brief room as needed. It is important refreshments are available.

Follow up

It is important to follow up with the former hostage or detainee to ensure they are coping well after the de-brief. Schedule times to check in with the former hostage or detainee and allow them access to a counselor if requested.

The de-brief process can be a difficult. Some have described it as 'surreal' and have experienced many emotions such as wondering if they have actually been released, being overwhelmed by the attention they receive and guilt if they have had to leave other hostages and detainees behind. If conducted with sensitivity, these negative feelings can be reduced and ultimately it can be a positive experience for some.

For more information on support for returning hostages and detainees or to get help yourself, please contact Hostage US at info@hostageus.org.