

Jupiter Cruise Ship Disaster – the Immediate and Long- Term Effect on Children and Staff

Background Information

21st October 1988, educational cruise ship *Jupiter* sinks within 40 minutes following a collision with *Adige*, in 270 feet of water off Piraeus in Greece. Four people die, the rest, teenagers adults and crew reach safety by perilous routes. One third have to swim to rescue boats.

One Child's Experience

Aged 14, in dining room when *Adige* slices through *Jupiter*, reverses, water enters, ship lists. Reaches lounge, amongst sliding furniture. Reaches deck, claws up to railings, helps others. Ship sinks, enters sea, holds non-swimmer during suction and high waves.

How are people *thought* to react in a disaster?

Hysteria, screaming, unable to think logically.

***Actual* reactions during Jupiter disaster**

Courage, care, concern, decision making, logical thought, group action.

During the disaster – trauma

Facial premature ageing, unexpected epileptic fit, unusual physical strength, shock, distress, anger.

Immediately afterwards – trauma

Silent sobbing, insomnia, aimless wandering, some catatonic, physical contact needed, worry.

Helping those in a disaster

1. *Be honest*
2. *Do not try to protect*
3. *Allow own choices*
4. *Be aware – person can still think!*

The next day – trauma

Distress at loss of lives, functioning on automatic, panic attacks, silent crying, anger at the press.

The next week (half-term) – trauma

Functioning on automatic, nervy, shaking, exhausted, insomnia, nightmares, lack of concentration, worrying (WERE WE GOING MAD?), exhaustion, memories “burnt” into brains, A NON-STOP VIDEO OF THE DISASTER PLAYING IN OUR HEADS.

We needed

1. *To be hugged, be in physical contact*
2. *Tell of one’s love for family and friends*
3. *Telephone each other*
4. *Talk and talk about the disaster*
5. *Be fed and clothed without worry*

GPs need Trauma/Disaster information

1. *Tranquilisers are not really helpful*
2. *Leaflets on where to get help (e.g. Disaster Action leaflets) would be better*
3. *Be aware of importance of first consultation after disaster and to keep full notes*

Return to School – trauma

Constantly breaking down, appreciation of affection, pupil/teacher relationship suspended, heightened sensitivity of touch and sound, waves of exhaustion, memory and concentration difficulties.

Parents stated

They couldn’t cope, child wouldn’t talk, or sleep, went out all the time/stayed in, began to seek counsellors.

THEIR CHILD WAS A STRANGER

Strongest emotions

Grief, anger, guilt, guilt and more guilt.

Trained disaster counsellor needed within ten days

1. *Talk to group, families and staff*
2. *Explain post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms*
3. *Reassure our reactions were normal*
4. *And we were NOT GOING MAD*

5. *Explain how we could be helped by others*
6. *That talking helps to make logical sense*
7. *That trauma does not “go away”*
8. *That professional help is available*
9. *Provide information sheet for reference*
10. *Answer questions*

Solicitors

We needed an independent adviser (e.g. Borough Solicitor) to explain:

- a. *Why solicitors were contacting us*
- b. *What was compensation*
- c. *The Law Society*
- d. *We must keep records of expenditure*
- e. *We must keep records, how we felt medically and mentally on a regular basis*
- f. *Answer questions*

Thanksgiving Service

Very important:

- a. *to bring community together*
- b. *to show emotion together*
- c. *to involve survivors/families*
- d. *to offer prayers for the injured and dead*

How the disaster changed our ideas

- a. *Girls older than peers*
- b. *Tomorrow doesn't always come*
- c. *Future not secure*
- d. *Consumer items lost their appeal*

Result

- a. *Innocence of fear/terror lost*
- b. *Childhood lost/teenage years lost*

Other disasters

Triggered memories, nightmares; we sympathised, we had “been there”, appreciated our survival.

Interviews with psychiatrists (compensation claims)

Caused distress, non-stop video began again.

Other school groups mirrored our own

Exhaustion, flashbacks, irrational fears, ill health, teachers unable to work.

October 1990 – another cruise

Seven from the Jupiter, two girls (one went into shock in dining room, the other slept at every opportunity). 18.15 off Piraeus dropped flowers, prayers. Ghosts not laid!

Solicitors

One letter caused distress and fury: (précis)

“Two thirds had not got feet wet, no-one saw loss of life, no guilt, no trauma, only four people died, £2000 take it or leave it.”

ON-GOING RESEARCH

British Medical Association

- 10 year study on Jupiter Children
- Research paper 1996 stated:
- 52% had suffered PTSD
- 66% had suffered mental illness
- 9% had attempted suicide
- 1 child had committed suicide
- (NB – Many refused to help in research)

My own experience

- Trauma does not go away
- It can be triggered
Scream, loud noise, men on a roof, reflections in water

Our Adults – Long Term Effects

- Three retired on health grounds
- Employment prospects were damaged
- Two suffer bad health since the Jupiter
- Two have died

Our Pupils – Long Term Effects

- One set a precedent to law by claiming compensation in the High Court
- Some are married, at University, have degrees, have worked abroad
- But some have had breakdowns and ill health
- There is considerable bitterness and anger at how their lives were changed

On the plus side, most:

- *Have a heightened sense of life*
- *Show their emotions easily*
- *Want careers helping others*

Who helped our Headteacher during the disaster?

Staff, Secretary, Director of Education. (No Emergency Planning Officer or Press Officer was involved)

Who co-ordinated rescue and return?

Rescue- Harbour Master, Chief of Police, Volunteer Rescue Boat Crews

Return – Travel Agent, Greek Government, British Embassy in Athens, Airport staff, Foreign Office, EuropAssistance, Headteacher.

Teachers need to be aware that up to 6 years after compensation has been paid to a survivor or a bereaved family, the case can be re-opened. Solicitors can be sued for bad advice and more compensation claimed. Schools can be requested to produce evidence of an entire school life, before and after the disaster, many years later.

School Trips require

1. *Good organisation*
2. *Communication channels (e.g. manifest lists, telephone chains, emergency contacts)*
3. *Rapport between staff*

Ideally

1. *Staff should have rest time before setting off on a trip*
2. *Leadership courses should be available*

Unforeseen Consequences 2008

All the Cator Park Group survived. The disaster changed some lives forever affecting health, careers and ability to travel abroad. However unforeseen consequences have affected many lives in the wider community.

- One Cator Park pupil went to the High Court of Justice to plead her case for compensation and we are told she set a precedent.
- All cruise ships are now expected to hold emergency drill for all passengers whilst in port before the ship sails.
- Prior to 1988 the widow and dependant children of a male teacher dying in service received generous financial support. The family of a woman teacher received nothing. It is believed the Jupiter disaster helped change this inequality.
- Research by the Medical Council and other specialists into the long term effects of the disaster on children has led to improved understanding and treatment for all suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Three Cator Park teachers offered suggestions to the Ministry of Education whilst a new directive on safety and school visits was prepared.
- Disaster Action was founded as a campaign charity in 1990. All its members are survivors and bereaved from disasters. Mary Champion, Cator Park ex teacher and the cruise organiser, represents the Jupiter and speaks at conferences on the long term effects of a disaster.
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the police, emergency planners and voluntary agencies have used Disaster action members as advisors to support those affected by 9/11, Bali, the Tsunami, London 7/7 and other disasters. For 16 years Disaster Action campaigned for a new Corporate Responsibility Bill. In 2007 it received Royal Assent.
- In 1998 the accounts of the Cator Park cruise groups were published in a book called 'Jupiter's Children.' It acted as a catalyst as families discussed, sometimes for the first time, what really happened on the Jupiter. Specialists use it as a resource. It is in the school's library and every Bromley Borough library under 'transport'.
- This year some of the Cator Park group will meet informally and will remember the 20th anniversary of our survival, our rescuers, school, families, friends, those who died or never returned, and the two of us who have since died.

***Mary Champion ex Cator Park teacher and cruise organiser
October 2008***