PSYCHOSOCIAL SURVIVAL GUIDE TO KIDNAPPING
BF paper

MSF OCBA

Psychosocial Care Unit to HR
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Compiled by Adriana Rubio, coordinated by Carla Uriarte (RASM)
For further information contact carla.uriarte@barcelona.msf.org

1. INTRODUCTION

This document has been written in response to requests from some GCs in countries where kidnapping is a risk. MSF teams exposed to this threat are therefore advised to acquire a range of psychosocial skills to cope with kidnapping if this should occur. Below is a list of general measures that we recommend regarding the best way to cope emotionally with a kidnapping.

2. SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES

2.1. At the moment of the kidnapping

⇒ Remember that the first 15-60 minutes are the most dangerous. The kidnappers are usually emotionally tense, nervous or aggressive because they are often attempting to avoid being noticed. Therefore, they may take out their tension on you.

⇒ Don't forget that your only aim if you are kidnapped is to survive. Therefore:
- If you are in a group, try not to get separated from the rest.
- Don't put up physical resistance or attempt to escape, especially if the kidnapper is armed.
- If they give you drugs, don't refuse them – normally the aim is to sedate you
- Try to stay calm and in control, even though your instinct may be fear and panic (see Appendix 1).
- Think of your fear as a normal reaction – this will help you stay in control.
- Follow instructions to the letter and show that you are obedient.
- Speak only when asked to and listen carefully.
- Don't use a confrontational or threatening tone; don't try to prove yourself to your captors.
- Don't stare your captors in the eye.
- Avoid sudden movements and surprise actions.
- Ask permission (to eat, drink, sit down, stand up).
- Remember that at the moment of kidnapping they will be nervous and you should make your behaviour predictable.

2.2. During the kidnapping

⇒ Remember that your primary aims are to:
- Survive
- Keep up your physical and mental health.
- Persuade your captors to give you the best living conditions possible.

⇒ During the kidnapping captors may utilise a range of intimidation techniques, in order to destabilise emotionally and mentally their hostage, including:
- Playing out false executions.
- Refusing or reducing medicine supplies, food or water.
- Interrupting vital cycles (such as rest).
- Administering drugs.
- Isolating the captive in places that are small, soundproofed and/or poorly lit.
- Forcing the captive to make physical effort (such as walking long distances).
- Making false threats or false promises of freedom.
- Making the captive feel responsible for the kidnapping.
- Degrading the person to show their own superiority.
- Attempting to demoralise, humiliate and dehumanise the captive.

Being aware that these are intimidation tactics will make you feel that these situations

are more controllable.

⇒ Look after yourself physically. Weight loss, health deterioration and physical complaints are common during captivitiy. Therefore:
- Accept any food and water offered to you even if you've lost your appetite and/or it is not served hygienically.
- Follow a regular pattern of activity and rest trying to maintain a day – night awareness.
- Keep your personal hygiene up.
- Try to do exercise every day. If you are in a confined space you can still contract and relax your muscles.

⇒ Look after your mental health. This will help you to overcome the isolation and avoid confusion and disorientation:
- Try to accept the situation and think about the best way of adapting to it.
- Don't lose your notion of time. Keep a daily schedule and a calendar, going by mealtimes, noises, whether or not there are visits and any other clues in your surroundings.
- Try to stay positive. Do mental exercises to visualise and think of happy, positive memories.
- Admit your fear and accept it as a normal reaction.
- Use meditation and other relaxation and breathing techniques. Appendix 1 contains some tips.
- Stick to your values and personal ethics.
- Reinforce your self-esteem by thinking of past achievements.
- Stay mentally active. Try reconstructing in your mind books or films that you've read or seen; make up stories, poems or mathematical operations.
- Remember that they can't take some things away from you – your education, the love of your nearest and dearest, and even the fact that your hair still grows!
- Bear in mind that alive you have exchange value for your kidnappers so however much they threaten and dehumanise you, they need you alive.
- Always stay hopeful. The longer you're in captive the more likely it is you'll be rescued alive.
- Keep your sense of humour!!

⇒ Endeavour to get the best living conidtions possible while you are captive:
- Keep your space clean.
- Try to hang on to your personal effects (watch, glasses, books) but don't resist if they take them off you.
- Ask for practical things like water, medicines and going to the toilet but also ask for books, musical instruments and space and time to do exercise.
- Make your living space as personalized as possible by using any photos or personal objects you have in your wallet.
- Designate specific areas for each activity.

⇒ Try to strike a cordial relationship with your captors. Your aim is for your kidnappers to see you as a person rather than an object of bargaining:
- Follow the instructions they give you but always preserve your dignity without being arrogant.
- Avoid singling yourself out and standing out.
- Don't show bravado (this can provoke violent reactions) but don't be cowardly either – try not to beg or cry to ask for help (this can cause scorn).
- Don't talk about political or ideological issues; try to chat about uncompromising subjects (such as the weather).

- Avoid taking sides in any rifts amongst your kidnappers.
- Don't threaten to testify against your captors.
- If your captors don't want to reveal their identity, don't express or show that you've recognised them.
- Watch your body and non-verbal language.
- Avoid comments on your own and others' failures and limitations.
- Show gratitude for any favours they do for you and try to return them.
- Using the word "we" encourages captors to think of you as someone who shares their concerns, but beware also of the Stockholm syndrome (see below).
- Avoid becoming dependent on your captors but don't challenge them or be aggressive towards them either.
- Don't give them the impression that you're investigating them or looking for a way to escape.

⇒ Try to project yourself as a reasonable, intelligent person who can cope with adversity in a dignified manner and try to control emotional changes and aggressive behaviour.

⇒ Watch out for directions, sounds and other factors that can give you clues as to your whereabouts.

2.3. The Stockholm syndrome

The hostage-taker relationship was given this name following a bank robbery in Stockholm in 1973 during which all of the hostages resisted rescue attempts and later refused to testify against their captors.

The Stockholm syndrome is used to denote situations where the hostage appears to empathize strongly with their captors as well as their motives and aims. At times, the captive may even feel as close to the captors as to take part in their group activities.

It is thought to be a natural reaction to the feeling of helplessness and the need to find meaning to life experiences. However, if the hostage is aware they are suffering from this syndrome, they should try to overcome it.

It often occurs when:

- The captives believe their captors may act violently or execute them.
- Escape is impossible.
- Hostage and taker share the same language, place of origin or life conditions.
- The hostages are cut off from other perspectives and/or news from the outside world.
- The kidnappers perform small acts of kindness in a general atmosphere of terror.

If you realise that you are developing the Stockholm syndrome you must attempt to minimize your positive feelings towards your captors. Remember above all that your freedom has been taken from you by force.

3. REACTIONS AFTER THE KIDNAPPING

When you have been freed you are might experience some of the following reactions as a survivor:

- Feelings of guilt about the concessions made during the negotiation.
- Shame at not having tried to escape.

- Critical of the authorities, the organisation or yourself for not having acted differently.
- Discomfort in relationships with relatives, friends, colleagues and your partner.
- Emotional and physical difficulties.
- Sexual alterations.
- Insomnia.
- Loss of appetite.
- Mood swings.
- Less motivation.
- Feeling of separation and/or alienation.

These reactions are completely natural and surmountable. MSF will give you and your family specialist support to get through this period.

4. FOR MORE INFORMATION

* www.geocities.com/kidhistory/trauma/stockholm.htm

* Staying alive: safety and security guidelines for humanitarian volunteers in conflict areas. Lloyd, 2005. ICRC

APPENDIX 1. RELAXATION AND BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Relaxation requires training. The quicker you learn to make use of these relaxation and breathing techniques, the better equipped you'll be when it comes to utilising them. Below is a simple daily self-relaxation programme. Mastering these exercises will only take you 15 minutes each day and they will be extremely useful in controlling your fear and anxiety in critical situations.

Daily self-relaxation programme

We recommend this extended programme. Taking the time to become familiar with it will make it useful and easy at critical times. If it is too much for you, try starting with a few random steps. They can be done in any order (except for breathing which should be the first skill you master).

Start by getting into a comfortable position. If possible lie on your back; otherwise sit up with your back straight but relaxed. Close your eyes and start the exercises:

Essential step: Learn to breathe. This is essential at the start of the relaxation and has fast, effective results (about 5 minutes). Put one hand on your chest and the other on your lower abdomen.

- Focus on your breathing for a few minutes. Breathe out slowly and deeply. Let your breathing guide you. Don't force it.
- Focus on full abdominal breathing for 5 minutes. Take the air into your lungs slowly and fill your abdomen with air as you breathe in. Hold the breath for 3 seconds and then breathe out through your mouth. Feel your diaphragm gently dropping when you breathe in.
- Repeat several breathing cycles at your own pace, calmly.
- Once you have practiced this breathing technique, relax and breathe with your body. Imagine every cell in your body breathing (your eyes, face, forehead, lungs, abdomen, muscles).
- If you find it easier to learn to breathe with your abdomen, do this exercise with a partner and check that each other's abdomen (not just their chest) is

inflating as they inhale and deflating as they exhale.

Step 2: Release yourself to gravity (around 3 minutes)

- Focus on your body as you breathe in slowly, deeply and silently.
- Be aware of the forces of gravity, feel the earth pulling you towards it. Feel the force of gravity on every single muscle in your feet, legs, thighs, back, shoulders, neck and head.
- Feel every muscle as a dead weight. Remove any thoughts of muscle contractions from your mind. Let your feet, legs and thighs melt into the floor. Your whole body is free from tension, relaxing.

Step 3. Contract – relax. You can do these exercises one after the other or choose just one part of the body, depending on the time you have and the circumstances you are in. You can do them lying down, sitting and even standing up. Pay attention to the feeling in your muscles when you relax them.

Arms

1. Start with your hands. Observe them. Now clench your fists and release them, enjoying the feeling for a few moments. Repeat twice.
2. Now your arms. Bend them at the elbow taking your fist to your shoulder, then release. Observe them relaxed. Repeat twice then rest.
3. Raise your shoulders as if you were shrugging. Feel how tense they become then release. Repeat twice then rest.
4. Your two shoulders, arms and hands are now relaxed. Feel how heavy and warm they are as they rest.

Face

1. Tense your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can, then relax. Repeat twice.
2. Wrinkle your nose and close your eyes tightly, then release them without opening and allow your eyelids to rest. Repeat twice.
3. Tighten your lips, teeth and tongue. Make sure they are fully tensed and then release. Feel them relax. Repeat twice.

Trunk

1. Fill up your chest with as much air as possible, hold it for a few seconds and feel your ribs and muscles tense, then release the air slowly and feel them relax.
2. Breathe normally again. Pull your stomach in tight, then relax. Repeat twice.
3. Arch your back and then bend towards yourself in the other direction. Relax. Repeat twice.

Legs and feet.

1. Tense all the muscles in your thighs. Release them. Repeat twice.
2. Do the same with your buttocks and calves.
3. Focus on your feet. If you are lying down, pull your toes back, towards your legs, and notice how your feet and shins become tense. Release and relax. Repeat twice. If you are standing, rise onto the balls of your feet and relax, repeat twice.