

# Interviewing a Subject Found Alive

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If the subject is found alive then a post-incident interview with the found subject should be conducted to determine what happened. Debriefing the found subject is one of the most important things to be done on successful searches.

Unfortunately at this point in the mission, people are tired, distracted, and eager to return home, and as a result the appropriate emphasis is often not put on this task. The interview should occur as soon as possible after the subject is rescued, but not before they have a medical evaluation and appropriate treatment. Frequently the interview can take place at the incident location, but sometimes it has to be done after the subject has left the incident for medical treatment, either at the hospital or at the subject's residence.

The subject debriefing should strive to gather a complete and fairly thorough understanding of the subject's actions, activities, thinking, analysis, and assumptions in a more or less chronological order.

The purpose of this meeting is for the Incident Management Team to

- Determine the effectiveness of the search effort.
- Learn what worked and what did not.
- Understand how the lost subject behaved during the search.
- Identify which investigative information was helpful, and which was not.
- Identify whether the scenarios on which the search strategies and tactics were based coincided with what actually happened.
- Improve the knowledge of lost person behavior in the appropriate jurisdiction.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the search objectives, strategies and tactics (what was the IMT doing and thinking while the subject was doing what they were doing, and why did the searchers not find them at that point?).
- Add accurate information to the statistical database for search area determination.
- Identify additional preventative SAR actions which can be implemented to prevent future incidents from occurring.
- Identify additional training needs for SAR managers and responders.
- Identify strategies and tactics that worked well and why.
- Identify strategies and tactics that might need improvement.
- Create new case studies with which to train search managers.

The interview should take place

- After the subject has been stabilized.
- After the subject and been reunited with family, either by phone or in person.
- In a quiet secure area, with only the subject and with a few members of the Incident Management Team, such as the IC, Ops, and Plans.
- Without any outside disturbances.
- In a friendly atmosphere, with no blame being assigned to the subject.

If possible the interview should be recorded and should always be documented in writing for future reference. A good summary of the debriefing can be invaluable in conducting the After Action Review.

The interview should start by telling the subject how pleased they are at the outcome. They should then explain the reason for the meeting, and ask the subject to describe what happened in their own words and at their own pace, as they remember it. During this process the subject should cover the following points, if appropriate.

- How and where did they get lost?
- What were they doing when they got lost?
- Once lost did they follow anything (drainage, wash, trail, landmark, ...)?
- At what stage did they stop moving and decide to wait to be found?
- How much water and food did they have with them?
- Did they find and drink water? Was the water purified?
- Did they encounter any wildlife?
- Did they see or hear a helicopter?
- Did they see or hear searchers?
- How did they respond to seeing or hearing searchers or aircraft?
- Did they use their cellphone, and where was coverage non-existent?
- Did the cellphone battery run out?

If the subject was hiking, then they should also cover the following points.

- When did they start hiking?
- What was their intended route?
- Why did they go off-trail?
- How long after they started hiking did they realize they were lost?
- How long after they started hiking did they decide to stop hiking and wait to be found?
- Did missing trail markers or too many trail crossings lead to their becoming lost?
- Did they become fatigued and try to find a shorter route back?

When the subject has finished, all of the previous points that were not covered during the narrative should be raised. Additional questions that could be asked are

- Did they have a map/compass/GPS and are they familiar with them?
- What could the searchers have done to find them quicker?
- Hypothetically, if they were unconscious during the search, do they think the searchers would have found them?
- Did the subject have any survival training? If so what?
- Once lost what did they do to increase their chances of survival?
- What did they do to increase their chances of detection?

Finally, they should be reminded of any medical advice given to them.<sup>1</sup>

However, be aware that occasionally not all subjects are totally candid with the interviewer. Some people find it difficult to be honest with Law Enforcement, which is confirmed when the evidence or clues are inconsistent with the narrative. Do not forget this!

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<sup>1</sup>If the subject found and drank unpurified water in the field, then they should be advised of the possible repercussions and treatment.