

# Guidance for Staff in Isolated and Hazardous Situations

## About this resource

When armed conflict occurs in an area where staff are providing services, staff can become cut off from internet/telephone service and may not be able to evacuate. Sometimes staff are unable to return home safely. In these situations, they may shelter in place or continue to deliver services as best as possible.

In such situations it is difficult or impossible for staff to access staff support functions such as counseling. As such, we have developed this resource for staff who find themselves in these types of isolated and hazardous situations. This resource can be downloaded (when possible), provided in hard copy, or recorded and sent as audio files that can be accessed if/when communications permit.

## Who is this resource for?

Staff working in active conflict zones who are cut off from communications and travel routes.

## What is in this resource?

This resource aims to help staff working in isolated and hazardous situations maintain resilience and wellbeing as best as possible. It explores strategies for:

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## Supporting your wellbeing when you are in a hazardous situation

Being in an isolated or in a hazardous situation is stressful. You may feel overwhelmed, afraid, and confused. It can be difficult to figure out what to do to help yourself and others.

It can feel strange to think about taking care of yourself when many people around you are suffering or fighting. However, taking care of your own wellbeing in isolated or dangerous situations is even more important than normal. You need to keep yourself in the best condition possible so that you are able to look after yourself and others and make good decisions about what to do next.

If you are in isolated or hazardous situations, research suggests that you can best support your wellbeing by paying attention to three important areas. The picture below shows you what these wellbeing priorities are.



## **1. Physiological needs**

Start by paying attention to your needs for water, food, and rest. The better you can attend to these basic needs, the better you will function and be able to cope with pressure and uncertainty.

In particular, take care of these things:

- **Water:** Make sure you are drinking enough water to stay well hydrated.
- **Food:** Eat regularly, even if you do not feel hungry. Try to eat food that is as nutritious as possible. Eat small meals or snacks often, rather than trying to eat larger meals.
- **Sleep:** Get as much sleep as you can. Rest regularly, even if you find it difficult or impossible to sleep.

It can feel difficult or selfish to prioritize eating and sleeping in situations when other people are struggling and suffering. Do it anyway. If you do not get enough water, sleep, and food, then nothing else you do to take care of yourself will work well, and you will not be able to make good decisions or help others effectively.

## **2. Safety and calm**

When you have attended as best you can to your physiological needs, do things that promote a sense of safety and calm. This will reduce the amount of stress chemicals that your body is producing and help you function better over time.

Everyone is different, so what works best to help you feel safe and calm may not work as well for someone else. However, here are several things that research suggests are helpful for everyone to try in these types of situations:

- **Exercise:** Do some exercise if you can, even if this means skipping rope or doing other exercises inside (e.g. walking around the rooms of a building or up and down stairs). Stress chemicals prepare your body to take action to deal with threats, so one of the best ways to help yourself cope with in high stress situations is to use up some of those stress chemicals by moving your body.
- **Breathing:** Slow your breathing. If you have not practiced breathing exercises before, try using the 3-3-3 technique. (Breathe in very slowly to the count of three, hold for three, release slowly for three. Repeat this sequence 5 times while saying the word “calm” to yourself as you exhale.) Why does this help? Well, stress chemicals make you breathe more quickly and shallowly. When you breathe slowly and deeply you send a clear message to your body to calm down your automatic stress reactions.
- **Find “anchors” for your thoughts and heart:** Many things can give us a sense of calm, hope, and perspective during seasons of intense stress. What has helped you feel safe, calm, and purposeful

during stressful times in the past? These things will probably also help you now if you are able to do them. You may like to try:

- Read or recite scripture and religious texts
- Meditate, pray, or visualize places and people you love
- Repeat mantras, words, or statements that help remind you of what you want to do and how you want to conduct yourself (who you want to be) during this time
- **Express it:** Describing or expressing what you are experiencing can help clear your mind and give you a calming sense of “getting it out.” You may not be able to talk to family, friends, or a counselor. However, you can probably write or keep notes, or maybe you can record voice memos on your phone. Even if no one else ever hears those voice messages, speaking about what you are experiencing can be very helpful for you.

### **3. Connection and belonging**

The third important area to pay attention to is your relationships. A sense of connection, affection, teamwork, and belonging is very important. If you go without these things for a long period of time, your wellbeing will suffer.

Here are some things you can try to do:

- **Connect with family and friends:** If phone lines and internet are down, this may be virtually impossible for a time. However, if you can connect with family and friends, do. And if you cannot talk, you may still be able to send text or voice messages or write about things you wish you could tell them.
- **Build a sense of connection with colleagues and teammates:** Build a sense of connection and team with any colleagues who are with you. Spend time with them and look for ways to support and encourage them, even if you do not know them well. The relationships you build will help sustain you and them.
- **Talk about what you are experiencing with you colleagues and teammates.** When you share what you are experiencing and feeling with teammates, it provides opportunities to both give and receive support.

Finally, if possible, ask for copies of the following resources:

- *Staying Calm In An Emergency*

## Supporting your wellbeing after you leave a hazardous situation

After you leave an isolated or hazardous situation you may experience a confusing mixture of reactions. These reactions can include feelings of relief, guilt, anger, exhaustion, and others.

Immediately after you leave or are evacuated, it is important to consider how you can support your wellbeing and help yourself recover. It is important to take time to rest and to process what you have experienced.

Be patient with yourself during this process. It will probably take longer than a day or two before you feel like you (and life) are anywhere back near “normal.”

Here are some things that can help after you leave a hazardous situation:

- **Rest:** If at all possible, take several days to just “be” without pressure to work or make important decisions. Get as much sleep as possible during this time.
- **Exercise and spend time outside:** Get some exercise and spend some time outside. This will also help you rest/sleep better.
- **Spend time with family and friends:** Spend some time with family and friends. This will help re-establish and strengthen important relationships and promote a sense of normalcy.
- **Process what you have experienced:** It is normal to feel a complex combination of uncomfortable and seemingly contradictory emotions (such as relief and guilt) after you leave a dangerous situation, especially if you feel like you have “left others behind”. It is important to acknowledge these feelings rather than trying to suppress and ignore them. There are many things you can do to help you explore and process what you have experienced. Here are some of them:
  - **Write about it:** A lot of research shows that writing about stressful or traumatic experiences can be helpful. Try writing about what you experienced, how you felt, what you have learned or how you have changed, and what you want to take with you from these experiences moving forward. You can also document your experiences (and any recommendations you have as a result) for your organization.
  - **Talk about it:** Talk about these things with trusted friends, family, and/or colleagues.
  - **Talk to a good counselor.** Your organization likely has an Employee Assistance and Resilience Program and can connect you with a counselor who understands the impact of intense experiences. Talking with a counselor can allow you to discuss your experiences and any concerns, consider your next steps, and plan for continuing self-care. It is particularly important to seek counseling if you experience any of the following:
    - You witnessed a great deal of violence and suffering
    - You keep thinking your recent experiences, even when you’re trying not to
    - Everything around you feels unreal, or you feel like you have lost your identity and do not know who you are now

- You feel extremely anxious, or have any panic attacks
- You feel very depressed, guilty, or hopeless
- You do not want to see or talk to anyone, you just want to be alone all the time
- You find yourself drinking and smoking a lot more (or self-medicating in other ways)

Finally, ask for copies of the following resources:

- *Self-Care During Mandatory Evacuation*