HELPING TEAMS STAY GROUNDED AMID "WHAT IF" ANXIETY

KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

In certain environments, uncertainty can feel relentless. For many teams in the Middle East and other places, an ever-shifting array of fears related to the possibility of enduring or escalating conflict have created a steady undercurrent of "what-if" anxiety.

This kind of anticipatory stress can be just as destabilizing and draining as an immediate crisis. It disrupts focus, narrows perspective, and makes it difficult for staff to feel anchored in the present.

We often hear managers say things like:

> *"My team is trying to stay focused, but the worry is constant. They ask me what happens if things escalate in the region — and I don't have answers."*

This guide is designed to help managers navigate those moments with steadiness and care. You don't need to have all the answers to offer meaningful support. You do need tools to help staff feel heard, validated, and grounded — even when uncertainty can't be resolved.

In the pages that follow, you'll find practical language, strategies, and reflection points you can use to help your team stay centered and manage "what-if" thinking.

WHAT IS WHAT-IF ANXIETY?

In insecure and high-stress environments, it's common for staff to experience a steady stream of intrusive thoughts about the future. These often begin with two small but powerful words: "What if…?"

> "What if the conflict spreads?"

> "What if we need to evacuate?"

> "What if we *can't* evacuate?"

> "What if my family isn't safe?"

> "What if something happens while I'm at work?"

> "What if I lose my job?"

> "What if this never ends?"

> **"What-if" anxiety is driven by the stress of uncertainty fueling fear of the unknown. It keeps people mentally stuck in possible future scenarios they can't control.**

This kind of anticipatory worry — sometimes called *"what-if" anxiety* — can be exhausting. Unlike an acute threat, which may trigger immediate action, "what-if" anxiety is driven by the stress of uncertainty fueling fear of the unknown. It keeps people mentally stuck in possible future scenarios they can't control, often replaying or escalating worst-case outcomes in their minds.

Over time, this can erode focus, wellbeing, and motivation. It may also lead to:

- Heightened emotional reactivity (e.g., irritability, fear, sadness)
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Pulling away from work or team engagement
- A persistent sense of dread, helplessness, or hypervigilance

Importantly, **these reactions are not irrational** — they reflect real threats, past experiences, or current instability in the region. But when the mind stays trapped in a constant loop of fear and projection, it becomes harder to stay anchored in the present or make effective decisions.

As a manager, you don't need to fix or eliminate this anxiety. But you can **help your team name it, normalize it, and regain a sense of steadiness** — even when the uncertainty is still very much present and unfolding.

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RESPONDING TO WHAT-IF ANXIETY: WHAT STAFF NEED

When staff are caught in cycles of "what-if" thinking, they don't need perfect answers. They need **your steadiness**, **your presence**, and **your ability to name what's hard while helping them focus on what's achievable and important**.

This section outlines five key needs staff may have during periods of anticipatory anxiety. The next section offers more information on Manager Tools — things you can say or do as a manager to meet those needs in grounded, compassionate ways.

1. Calm Presence, Not Certainty

In times of fear and speculation, your tone matters. Staff aren't expecting you to have all the answers or predict the future, and they're not looking for forced optimism or vague reassurances. They are looking for cues that you care and that it's possible to stay steady, even when things feel so uncertain.

2. Validation and Emotional Space

Many staff feel pressure to suppress their anxiety or stay "professional" at all costs. Simply acknowledging and normalizing their emotional reality can reduce shame and create space for healthier coping.

3. Clear, Consistent Communication

In uncertain times, silence or inconsistency can fuel anxiety. Even when there's no new information, staff need to hear that you're aware of the situation and will keep them informed.

4. Grounding and a Sense of Control

"What-if" anxiety often creates a sense of mental chaos. Staff may feel stuck in spiraling thoughts about things they can't control. As a manager, you can help them focus on the present, regain perspective, and take manageable steps forward.

5. Purpose and Meaning, Even Amid Uncertainty

When fear takes over, people may start to question whether their efforts still matter. Managers play a vital role in reminding staff of their impact — and the value of staying connected to one another.

MANAGER TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

The five needs described in the previous section — calm presence, validation, clear communication, grounding, and a sense of meaning — can't be met with a single conversation. They're met through **daily signals**, **simple tools**, and **the way you show up for your team over time**.

This section offers practical techniques and examples of what you can say or do as a manager to support your team when "what-if" anxiety is high.

1. Convey Calm Without Pretending You're Unaffected

Your emotional steadiness matters more than you might think. You don't need to be perfectly calm or have all the answers — but you do need to show up with presence, clarity, and care.

What can help

- Take 60–90 seconds before meetings to breathe and ground yourself.

- Use calming mantras to steady yourself, like: *"Steady and present."* or *"Calm is contagious."*

- Keep your tone measured and reassuring, especially when discussing unknowns. Your tone and consistency are what people remember.

You could say

> "I'm feeling the impact of this uncertainty too — and I'm here with you."

> "We may not know what's coming, but we'll take it one step at a time."

> "Let's focus on what we can do today."

You don't need to be perfectly calm or have all the answers — but you do need to show up with presence, clarity, and care.

2. Validate Emotions Without Fueling Fear

In high-stress environments, many staff feel pressure to "stay professional" and hide their emotions. Offering space to name what they're feeling — without trying to fix it — builds trust and reduces shame.

What can help

- Start check-ins with gentle prompts: "What's something that's been weighing on you this week?" or "What's been helping you cope?"
- Let staff know it's okay to talk about fears without being told to be positive.
- Avoid spiraling speculation or forced cheerfulness — just be real and steady.

You could say

> "It's normal to feel unsettled or distracted — this is a lot."
> "You're not alone in this. A lot of us are carrying similar concerns."

Offering space to name what they're feeling — without trying to fix it — builds trust and reduces shame.

3. Communicate Regularly, Even When There's No New Information

Silence or vagueness can escalate anxiety. Predictable, filtered information reduces confusion and rumor-based anxiety. Even when you don't have updates, consistent and honest communication helps people feel anchored and less alone.

What can help

- Set a predictable rhythm for updates (e.g., "I'll check in every Thursday, even if there's no new information.")
- Filter what you share: avoid passing along unconfirmed reports or overwhelming detail. When forwarding information, preface with a sentence about its credibility or relevance.
- Be transparent about what's known, what's unknown, and what's being monitored.

Consistent and honest communication helps people feel anchored and less alone.

You could say

> "There's no new information right now, but I'll let you know if anything changes."

> "Here's what we know today — and here's what we're still waiting to learn."

> "If that changes, I'll update you. Until then, let's stay focused on what's in front of us."

4. Use Grounding Tools to Restore Focus and a Sense of Control

Anxiety narrows perspective and can leave people feeling stuck. Helping your team return to the present and take small, manageable steps forward can ease emotional overwhelm.

What can help

- Open meetings with grounding prompts: "What's one thing helping you feel steady this week?" or "What's one word that describes how you're arriving today?"

- Encourage short breaks from news and distressing inputs.

- Use simple visuals (like a Circle of Control) to help staff recognize what they *can* influence. This tool can gently shifts attention from helplessness to agency, without minimizing the broader context.

You could say

> "What's one thing you can focus on today that's in your control?"

> "Let's take a short reset and come back to this with fresh eyes."

> "It's okay to pause and breathe — that's not avoidance, it's a reset."

Helping your team return to the present and take small, manageable steps forward can ease emotional overwhelm.

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5. Reinforce Meaning and Connection

Fear and uncertainty can disconnect people from purpose. As a manager, you can help reconnect the team to what matters — their impact, their effort, and their shared humanity.

What can help

- Celebrate small wins and moments of care or creativity.
- Use rituals (like weekly gratitude rounds or end-of-week reflections) to foster cohesion.
- Share appreciation for presence and effort, not just outcomes.

You could say

> "The work you're doing really matters — even in the middle of all this."

> "Showing up and supporting each other right now makes a difference."

> "Let's take a moment to acknowledge how we've gotten through this week together."

Help reconnect the team to their impact, their effort, and their shared humanity.

These aren't one-time tools — they're steady signals that your team is not alone, not invisible, and not powerless. Used consistently, they help staff stay more grounded, connected, and resilient — even in moments of deep uncertainty.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Leading during periods of uncertainty and fear is emotionally demanding. You may find yourself carrying your team's worries while also managing your own — all while trying to stay grounded enough to lead well. That's a lot.

If you're showing up with care, with consistency, and with even a few simple strategies to support your team — that matters. It's not about saying the perfect thing or having the right response every time. It's about building trust, reducing isolation, and helping your team stay steady enough to keep going.

When you pause to check in, when you name what's hard, when you offer a grounding question or a small moment of connection — you are helping your team navigate uncertainty in a way that protects their dignity and capacity.

This kind of leadership may not be loud or dramatic. But it is powerful.

Make time to reset. Talk with a peer. Set boundaries when you can. Ask for support when you need it. And remind yourself — you are already doing more than you think.

REFLECTIVE CHECKLIST FOR MANAGERS

Take a few minutes to reflect — or use this as a tool during supervision, peer support, or end-of-week planning:

Emotional Presence & Grounding

☐ Have I taken even 90 seconds to ground myself before meeting with my team?
☐ Am I modeling steadiness without pretending everything is okay?
☐ What's helping *me* stay grounded this week?

Communication

☐ Have I communicated clearly, even if there's no new information?
☐ Have I been transparent about what we do and don't know?
☐ Is there a predictable rhythm to how I'm updating the team?

Team Support & Emotional Climate

☐ Have I acknowledged that this is a hard time — without dramatizing it?
☐ Have I offered space for my team to name what they're feeling?
☐ Have I noticed signs of overload or withdrawal in team members?

Purpose & Connection

☐ Have I reinforced that our work still matters — even in uncertainty?
☐ Have I celebrated effort or small wins this week?
☐ Are there ways I've helped the team stay connected to each other?

Manager Wellbeing

☐ Have I taken a break or reset moment today?
☐ Have I talked to a peer, coach, or supervisor about how I'm doing this week?
☐ Am I holding more than I need to alone?

ABOUT KONTERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.

Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: info@konterragroup.net.