



GUIDANCE FOR STAFF

In Isolated and Hazardous Situations



KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

When armed conflict occurs in an area where staff are providing services, staff can become cut off from internet and 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 they can. In such situations it is difficult or impossible to access staff support services such as counselling.

This resource aims to help staff working in isolated and hazardous situations maintain resilience and wellbeing as best as possible. It can be downloaded in advance, provided in hard copy, or recorded and sent as audio files that can be accessed if and when communications permit.

SUPPORTING YOUR WELLBEING WHEN YOU ARE IN A HAZARDOUS SITUATION

Being in an isolated or 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.

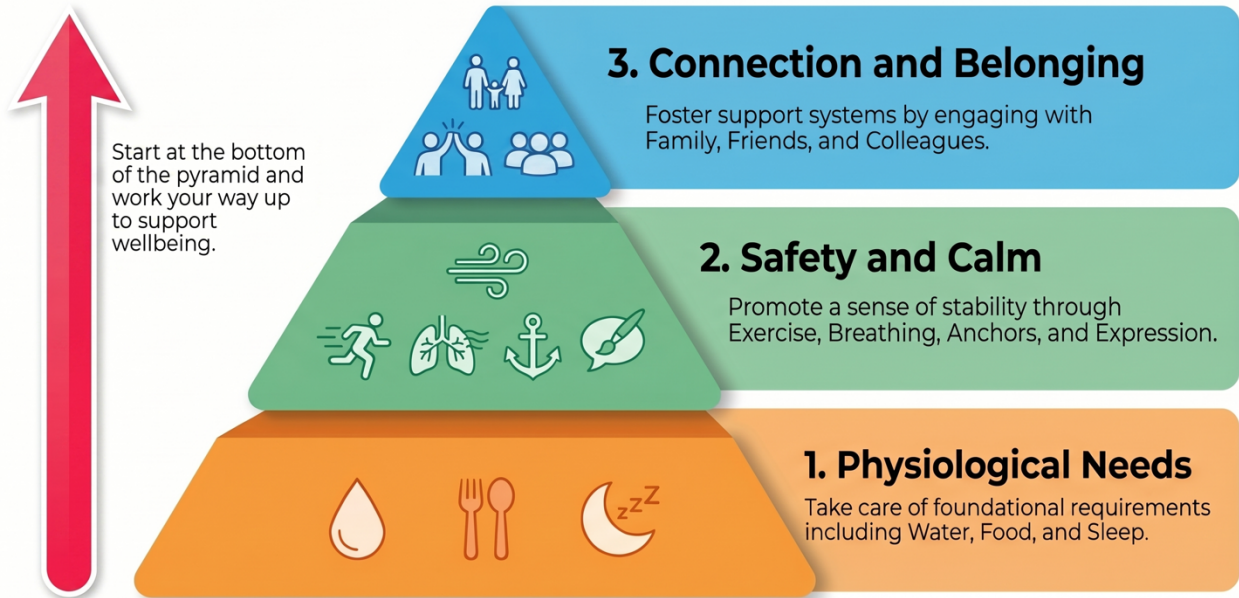
It can feel strange or wrong to focus on taking care of yourself when people around you are suffering. But taking care of your own wellbeing when you are isolated or in dangerous situations is even more important than usual. You need to keep yourself in the best condition possible so you can look after yourself and others and make sound decisions about what to do next.

Research on wellbeing in crisis settings suggests that you should pay attention to three important areas.

Staff Wellbeing Priorities in Hazardous Situations

1. **Physiological Needs** — water, food, sleep
2. **Safety and Calm** — exercise, breathing, anchors, expression
3. **Connection and Belonging** — family, friends, colleagues

Staff Wellbeing Priorities in Hazardous Situations



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1. Physiological needs

Start by attending to your basic needs for water, food, and rest. The better you can meet these needs, the better you will function and cope with pressure and uncertainty.

In particular, take care of these things:

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

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

Once you have attended as best you can to your physiological needs, focus on things that promote a sense of safety and calm. This reduces the stress response in your body and helps you function better over time.

What works best will vary from person to person. Here are strategies that research suggests are helpful:

Exercise

Move your body if you can, even if this means walking around a building, or up and down stairs, or using a skipping rope. Stress chemicals prepare your body to take physical action. Using them up through movement is one of the most effective things you can do to help yourself cope.

Breathing

Slow your breathing deliberately. Try this: *breathe in slowly for a count of three, hold for three, release slowly for three. Repeat five times, saying the word "calm" silently as you exhale.* Stress causes shallow, rapid breathing; slow, deep breathing sends a clear signal to your body to ease the stress response.

Find anchors

Think about what has helped you feel grounded, calm, and purposeful during difficult times before. These things can serve as anchors for your thoughts and sense of identity now. Different things work for different people. You might try:

- Reading, reciting, or praying from religious or spiritual texts
- Meditation, visualization, or bringing to mind people and places you love
- Listening to or quietly singing music that matters to you
- Repeating words or statements that remind you of your values and how you want to conduct yourself during this time
- Focusing on a meaningful object, memory, or simple routine that helps you feel like yourself

Express it

Describing what you are experiencing can help clear your mind and give you a sense of release. You may not be able to talk to family, friends, or a counsellor. But you can probably write, keep notes, or record voice memos on your phone. Even if no one else ever hears those messages, speaking or writing about what you are going through can be genuinely helpful.

3. Connection and belonging

A sense of connection, affection, and belonging is important for wellbeing. Without it over a prolonged period, your resilience will suffer. Here are some things you can try to do:

Reach out to family and friends

If lines are down, this may be impossible for a time. But if you can connect — even briefly — do. If communication is not possible, you can still write about things you wish you could tell them. This matters even if no one reads it.

Hold uncertainty about family with care

Not knowing whether family members are safe is one of the hardest aspects of being cut off. It is normal for this uncertainty to be distressing. Try not to fill in the gaps with worst-case assumptions. Do what you can with the information available, and return your attention to what is in front of you.

Build connection with colleagues

Spend time with colleagues who are with you and look for ways to support and encourage each other, even if you do not know them well. The relationships you build will help sustain all of you.

Talk about what you are experiencing

Sharing what you are feeling with teammates creates opportunities to both give and receive support. You do not need to have it figured out before you speak.

A note on human limits

The strategies in this resource can help. They are not a substitute for safety, rest, or human connection at the scale you need. There are thresholds beyond which individual coping strategies are not enough — and recognizing that is not failure. If you reach a point where you feel you cannot continue to function, or you are in significant distress, it is important to tell someone if you can and to ask for help.

AFTER YOU LEAVE A HAZARDOUS SITUATION

After leaving an isolated or hazardous situation you may experience a confusing mixture of reactions – relief, guilt, anger, exhaustion, grief, or others. These can arrive in unexpected combinations and at unexpected times.

If you now have access to support again, it is important to use it. Take time to rest and to process what you have been through. Be patient with yourself. It will probably take longer than a day or two before you feel anything like “normal.” Here are some priorities:

Rest

If at all possible, take several days without pressure to work or make important decisions. Get as much sleep as you can.

Exercise and get outside

Physical activity and time outdoors will also help you sleep better.

Reconnect with family and friends

Spending time with people you care about helps re-establish important relationships and restore a sense of normality.

Process what you experienced

It is normal to feel a complex and sometimes contradictory mix of emotions, particularly if you feel you left others behind. Do not try to suppress or rush past these feelings. Here are some ways to work through them:

- **Write about it.** Research consistently shows that writing about stressful experiences helps. Try writing about what you went through, how you felt, what you have learned, and what you want to carry forward.
- **Talk about it.** Talk with trusted friends, family, or colleagues.
- **Talk to a counsellor.** Your organization likely has an Employee Assistance or staff wellbeing program. A counsellor can help you process your experiences, consider next steps, and plan for ongoing self-care.

It is particularly important to seek professional support if you experience any of the following:

- You keep reliving recent experiences, even when you are trying not to
- Everything around you feels unreal, or you feel like you have lost your sense of who you are
- You feel extremely anxious, or have panic attacks
- You feel very depressed, guilty, or hopeless
- You do not want to see or talk to anyone
- You find yourself using alcohol or other substances significantly more than usual

There is no perfect way to get through something like this. Do what you can with what you have, and extend yourself the same care you would offer to a colleague in the same situation.

The KonTerra Group specialises in supporting staff who work in complex, high-stress, and high-risk environments. Our counsellors, trainers, and coaches work with individuals, leaders, and teams to strengthen resilience and navigate the challenges that come with demanding roles. For more information, contact your KonTerra account manager or email info@konterragroup.net.