

Managing Anxiety in Times of National or International Tension

Political conflict and change are normal features of life, but in times of heightened tension and polarisation – within a country or between countries – they can cause widespread anxiety.

Political conflict within a country can lead to heated disputes and hard feelings. The more closely a person's political stances are tied to their core values and beliefs, the more they may worry about the consequences of political changes. When 'your side' loses, it can feel like the world is going off track in terrible and permanent ways. You can feel personally threatened in ways that trigger deep and uncomfortable emotions. When polarisation is intense, a country's political conflicts can lead to violence.

Conflict between countries, when it escalates to threats of or actual armed conflict, can be even more disturbing, raising the threat of immediate danger and loss of life.

Compounding the emotional effect of political polarisation or international tension is the constant access to the news through smartphones and other technology, often amplified by social media. It can feel like there's no escape from jarring and disturbing headlines.

How can you manage your anxiety in times of national and international tension while also remaining engaged in positive ways? The more people are involved in positive ways, the healthier your society and community will be – and the more you are aware of the actual risks surrounding the tension, the better prepared you will be to keep you and your family safe. Following are some suggestions from mental health experts about how to stay aware and involved while attending to your own wellbeing.

Stay informed, but set boundaries on your news intake.

If you find the news to be emotionally upsetting, set limits on how much you take in. Unless there is an imminent risk of danger for you or someone you love, resist the temptation to check the headlines constantly throughout the day. Turn off nonemergency alerts from news feeds so they don't constantly grab your attention and distract you. Instead, set aside a short block of time in the morning and early evening to catch up on new developments. Limit your exposure to exchanges of political opinion on social media and worst-case predictions of what might happen next.

Instead of waiting for the news to come to you, do research on issues that matter to you, looking at well-researched and reliable sources. Learn about the full range of possible next steps in the current state of tension, and come up with practical plans for ways you might respond.

Be respectful in conversations about politics.

In a polarised world, people may sometimes attach evil motives or negative attributes to those who disagree with their positions. Accept that people have different opinions – based on their life experience, their understanding of the world and their values. Be open to listening to and learning from the views of others. Share your own views, when appropriate, in respectful and thoughtful ways. A good way to hear another person and to be heard is to share the life stories that lie behind their (and your) views and opinions. This gives you an opportunity to connect at a human level and to explore the grey areas of difficult subjects, instead of simply

disagreeing based on oversimplified assumptions. Look for the areas where you agree and the experiences you have shared, and build from that.

Be mindful of your surroundings, too, when you express your political views. It's generally not appropriate to debate political differences at work, for example, or to force a political conversation on a colleague. Even when you have an interested listener, be aware of who else is within range to hear your conversation and who might be offended or upset by your views. Political discussions among family members or friends with different views can also become emotional. Given how difficult it is to change a person's views, consider whether it's worth risking important relationships to have those conversations. It may be better to focus on shared interests.

If a conversation about politics becomes heated and unproductive at work or socially, politely step away from it or change the subject. Resist the temptation to get in the last word.

Get involved.

One of the most important actions you can take to maintain a sense of control in a turbulent world is to get involved. You can try these ideas:

- Express your political views in peaceful ways when that is possible and safe, by gathering with others in a peaceful demonstration, for example, or writing a thoughtful opinion piece for a newspaper.
- In times of war, follow the guidance and laws of your government and your conscience, participating in military service, for example, or contributing to public service in another way.
- Share your ideas with government officials and others in your community.
- Find opportunities to volunteer in your community or for a cause you care deeply about.
- Engage in small acts of kindness to neighbours or people in need.
- Attend a local government meeting to listen and learn about local issues.
- Educate yourself on an issue you care about, and find ways to help organisations that are working to make a difference in that area.

When you take positive and responsible action, it helps your community and society at large. It also helps you overcome feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.

Take a long-term perspective.

In the longer arc of history, opposing forces push in one direction, then another – and somehow countries, communities and individuals get through troubling times. When you find yourself caught up in anxiety about today's news, think back to other contentious times and the progress that has been made from generation to generation. It's also important to understand that big changes take time, and that progress rarely follows a straight and steady line.

Seek calm in your community, mindfulness, faith or nature.

Different people have different ways of finding calm in stressful times. Turn to your circle of supportive friends, practices like mindfulness and meditation, or your faith and community. Time in nature can also help you remove yourself – even if only for a few moments at a time – from the turbulence that is causing stress. With a calmer mind, you'll be better able to engage with the world as it is and find some peace.

Take care of yourself.

- **Take time to enjoy family and friends.** This is important even when you can't be together in person. Supportive, social connections are key to maintaining physical and mental health.

- **Get enough sleep.** Follow a consistent bedtime routine, and avoid the stimulation of screen time, alcohol or caffeine as bedtime approaches.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Incorporate plenty of fruits, vegetables and wholegrains. Include fish, poultry and nuts for protein. Avoid packaged foods and foods with added sugar.
- **Be physically active.** Include a walk or other activity in your daily routine. Physical activity is vital to staying healthy and has an important, calming effect.
- **Pursue interests and hobbies.** Engage in activities that give you pleasure and absorb your full attention. Take an online class to learn a new skill, or delve deeper into a lifelong passion.
- **Find ways to laugh.** Watch a funny film or TV programme. Spend time with friends who can make you laugh. Humour is wonderful medicine to counter worries.
- **Avoid ineffective and potentially harmful coping mechanisms.** This includes alcohol or substance use.

Seek help.

If the stress around the current situation feels overwhelming, and anxiety, sadness, anger or other emotions make it hard to cope with your daily routine, seek help. Some emotional challenges are too big to tackle by yourself. A trusted friend may be able to help as a sounding board and sympathetic ear, or you might benefit from the help of a professional mental health counsellor or therapist. Your employee support programme can help with short-term strategies for coping with anxiety, and most can help you find a therapist for in-person, telephonic or video support sessions.

Morgan, H. (2022). *Managing anxiety in times of national or international tension* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Staying Safe, Alert and Steady in a Dangerous Situation

When you find yourself in a dangerous situation, your first priority is to keep yourself safe and find ways to meet basic physical needs – for water, food, shelter and treatment of any injuries, for example. If children or others who depend on you are with you, you also need to keep them safe and attend to their basic needs. If the danger is long-lasting, you will also need to find ways to maintain your vigilance, energy and clear thinking until the danger has passed or you have moved to a place of greater safety.

Stay safe and attend to basic needs.

Find reliable information about what has happened and is happening. When someone tells you something, ask where the information came from. Be cautious about acting on information from sources that may not be trustworthy.

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Find out

- About ongoing dangers – from violence, fire, flooding, unstable buildings or land mines, for example
- How people can get to a place of greater safety, and where and when it is safe to change location
- Whether anyone you might be able to help needs physical assistance
- Who is available to help you (neighbours, volunteers, aid organisations)
- Where to go or what steps to take to get the help you need
- Where is the nearest and safest place to get drinking water, food, shelter and medical care
- Where it is safe to go and where it is not; what actions or behaviours are unsafe or could make you a target of violence

Attend to your most important needs first and to the most important needs of anyone who is with you and depends on you. That might be for

- Drinking water
- Food
- Shelter and warmth
- Wound care or medical treatment
- Sanitation
- Transportation to a safer place
- Help in steadying and composing someone so they can get to safety

Prioritise the most critical needs and the needs of the most vulnerable people who are with you. Less pressing needs can wait.

Stay alert and vigilant while you remain in danger:

- Pay attention to what is happening around you.
- Stay informed of changing risks and new sources of help.

[Control fear and panic.](#)

Fear and panic can exhaust you and muddy your thinking. Use grounding and self-calming techniques to steady yourself when you feel panicky. Try several techniques until you find something that works for you. Understand that when you are in danger and unusually anxious, calming techniques that work for others (and might have worked for you in the past) may not work for you now. You might find that strategies that work to steady you one day don't work the next. These are normal experiences in exceptional circumstances, not signs that the techniques are failing or that you are doing something wrong. Try again with a different grounding or calming technique until you find one that helps.

Here are some grounding techniques to steady yourself when you feel panicky, dazed or out of touch with your surroundings:

- Put both of your feet on the floor or ground. Stomp them several times, shift weight or wiggle your toes, paying attention to the sensations in your toes, feet and legs.
- Press or rub your palms together, noticing the pressure, warmth or coolness, and sensations of touch.
- Touch or pick up a small item that's within reach. Notice its texture and weight and whether it is warm or cool.
- Tap your fingers in your lap. Pay attention to sensations in both your fingers and your lap, and to the rhythm you are tapping. Try alternating left and right taps.
- Touch something comforting, such as a soft or smooth fabric on your bedding or an item of clothing.

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- Put your hands in water, if available, focusing on what it feels like on different parts of your hands.
- Move your body by stretching, jumping up and down, walking or jogging (even if it's just a few steps). Pay attention to how your body feels as you move and the sensation as your feet touch the ground.
- Savour the taste of food or drink in your mouth or the scent of a spice, herb or bar of soap.
- Look at an object, and name its colour as precisely as you can (not just red or blue but maroon, crimson, turquoise or royal blue).
- Play a memory game. Remember as many details as you can about a familiar place, or look closely at a photograph, then turn it over and try to recreate it in your mind with as much detail as possible.
- Count backward from 100. Try it by ones, sevens or another number.

Here are some calming techniques to relax yourself when you are feeling tense:

- Breathe deeply and slowly. Place a hand on your belly, and feel it move with your breaths.
- Tense, then relax your muscles, one part of your body at a time, moving from your feet up to your neck and shoulders.

This article offers a long list of techniques – not to suggest you use them all but to give you options and let you find the ones that work for you when you need them.

Take care of your health for energy and a clear mind.

You may not be able to follow a normal routine of healthy meals, exercise and undisturbed sleep, but do the best you can to take care of your health with the resources and space available to you:

- Consider your food options, and do your best to eat a healthy mix of foods on a regular schedule.
- Keep hydrated with the cleanest drinking water available to you.
- Get some physical activity, even if it is limited to walking or jogging in place, stretching or another exercise within the area that is safe for you.
- Get outdoors for some fresh air if you can do so safely.
- Sleep (or nap) when you can. Sleep allows you to concentrate, react quickly to new threats and make sound decisions. If you are with another adult, you might take turns sleeping while the other remains alert.

Talk with someone.

If you can, talk with someone who is able to steady you and give you emotional strength so that you can think clearly about what to do. That might be someone who is with you, or it might be someone you can talk to by phone or video conference. It might be a friend or family member. It might be a professional counsellor or someone working with an aid organisation. Seek out and accept help, for your own sake and the sake of your loved ones.

This article was co-authored and reviewed by Galina Itskovich, Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)-R, Master of Social Work (MSW), Bachelor's in Psychology; Ana Beirao, Clinical Psychologist, Member of the Board of Portuguese Psychologists and Clinical Team Lead for Workplace Options; and Eliana Guerreiro, Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Counsellor, Clinical Psychologist and Case Manager for Workplace Options, and also a Member of the Board of Portuguese Psychologists.

Galina Itskovich has a private practice in Brooklyn, New York; more than 20 years of experience in the fields of mental health and developmental disorders; areas of expertise include trauma, critical incidents/disaster mental health and early childhood/developmental disorders. She is published many times in academic journals; has extensive teaching, presenting and supervisory experience; and is a certified 'Psychological First Aid' Trainer.

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Morgan, H. (2022, 6 June). *Staying safe, alert and steady in a dangerous situation* (E. Morton & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Grounding Techniques to Help Control Anxiety

When faced with a stressful or dangerous situation, the mind and body react naturally by shifting into a heightened state of readiness – the *fight-or-flight response*. That can be a good thing if you need to react quickly to danger. However, sometimes the mind and body overreact and enter a frozen or detached state, leaving you unable to think clearly or take appropriate action. Sometimes, too, anxiety disorders or long-lasting reactions to trauma can result in high-alert reactions when they're not needed, which can interfere with daily life and leave you exhausted. Anxiety can also cycle in a deepening spiral, with an initial anxious response triggering even greater anxiety or panic.

Grounding techniques – practices that help distract from fears and unwanted memories – offer a way to control unhelpful anxiety responses. They can help you pull out of a frozen or detached state so that you can think more clearly and choose how to act. They can help you break free from an anxiety spiral, giving you a greater sense of control and confidence.

Here are a wide range of grounding techniques to try when your anxiety feels overwhelming or out of control. Try one, two or a few of them until you find something that works for you.

Physical and Sensory Grounding Techniques

- Put both of your feet on the floor or ground. Stomp them several times, shift weight or wiggle your toes, paying attention to the sensations in your toes, feet and legs.
- Press or rub your palms together, noticing the pressure, warmth or coolness, and sensations of touch.
- Touch or pick up a small item that's within reach. Notice its texture and weight and whether it is warm or cool.
- Tap your fingers in your lap. Pay attention to sensations in both your fingers and your lap, and to the rhythm you are tapping. Try alternating left and right taps.
- Put your hands in water (if available), focusing on what it feels like on different parts of your hands.
- Hold a piece of ice (if available) in your hand, noticing the sensation of coldness and the feeling of the water on your skin as the ice melts.
- Dip your face in cold water and hold it there for a few seconds, or splash cold water onto your face. The sensation of the cool temperature on your skin can help interrupt an anxiety spiral.
- Breathe deeply and slowly. Place a hand on your belly, and feel it move with your breaths.
- Savour the taste of food or drink in your mouth or the scent of a spice, herb or bar of soap.
- Listen to the sounds around you, whether it's from traffic, bird songs, the wind or conversation. Identify the sounds in your mind, and let them remind you of where you are.
- Move your body by stretching, jumping up and down, walking or jogging (even if it's just a few steps). Pay attention to how your body feels as you move and the sensation as your feet touch the ground.

Mental Grounding Techniques

Focusing your mind on a mental task can help you pull out of an anxiety reaction:

- Name each member of your family, their ages and something special about each of them.
- Look at an object, and name its colour as precisely as you can (not just red or blue but maroon, crimson, turquoise or royal blue).
- Play a memory game. Remember as many details as you can about a familiar place, or look closely at a photograph, then turn it over and try to recreate it in your mind with as much detail as possible.
- Count backward from 100. Try it by ones, sevens or another number.
- Spell your name or the names of people you know backward.
- Recite something, a poem or passage from a book that you know well, or the words to a favourite song.
- Think of an ordinary activity, and describe to yourself each step it requires.
- Play a category game. Choose a category, like animals, sports teams, rivers or vegetables, and name as many things as you can in that category in a minute or two.

Soothing Grounding Techniques

- Picture the face of someone you love, or imagine their voice and what they might say to calm you.
- Call a favourite place to mind – what it looks like, its sounds and smells, what it feels like to be there.
- Touch something comforting, such as a soft or smooth fabric on your bedding or an item of clothing.
- Spend a few quiet minutes with your pet, or imagine what it would be like to be sitting with it.

Seek help.

A professional counsellor can help you find strategies for dealing with your anxiety, including ways to use these and other grounding and calming techniques. A counsellor can also help you identify the root causes and triggers of your anxiety and can guide you to effective treatment.

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Morgan, H. (2022, 6 June). *Grounding techniques to help control anxiety* (E. Morton & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

When You're Concerned About Loved Ones in an Area of Armed Conflict

If you have family members, friends, work colleagues or other loved ones who are in an area of armed conflict, it's natural to be worried for their safety. It's also natural for the loved ones who are at risk to be the focus of your attention. However, as a concerned family member or friend, staying in touch and trying to help from a distance, you have needs, too. It's important to recognise and attend to your needs so that you can continue to provide steady and possibly critical support and assistance.

The emotions you feel in this situation can be intense, painful and confusing. You might feel

- Heartbroken that people you love are suffering and a place you love is being harmed
- Helpless, powerless or useless as an observer from afar
- Panicky and fearful when the news is bad or when you can't communicate with your loved ones
- Angry at your loved ones for staying when they might have left and, at the same time, proud that they are there and might help to make a difference

Here are some ways to take care of yourself so that you can continue to provide valuable support to the people you love.

Stay connected.

Social support is vital for good mental health:

- Maintain connection with your loved ones who are in the area of conflict or who are dealing with the stresses of relocation. It can help them to know that you care about them.
- If normal channels of communication become difficult, seek alternatives. Text messaging is sometimes an option when phone or video connections aren't possible.
- Maintain your own circle of social support. Spend time with the people who care about you and can help you relax when you're feeling anxious.

Keep fears in perspective.

Understand that media coverage often makes the world seem more dangerous than it really is. Yes, a war zone is dangerous, but not to every person every day. The vast majority of soldiers in combat are not hurt, and the risk to civilians is even lower. When you see alarming images in the media, try to remember that what you're seeing are the most dramatic events of the day, not what is happening everywhere.

Manage media consumption.

Stay informed, but pace your exposure if the news is making you anxious. Turn off news alerts, or select only those you think are necessary. Set aside specific times in the day to catch up on new developments. Do research yourself, looking at reliable sources, rather than letting the flood of news overwhelm you. Use social media for its strengths: connecting with others and getting access to people in a position to witness unfolding events. Be wary of social media's weaknesses: the unfiltered spread of opinion and false or distorted information.

Maintain routines.

Stick to daily and weekly routines, or establish new ones, to accommodate changes in your activities (such as conversations with people in different time zones). Regular times for meals, sleep, exercise and breaks for relaxation provide comfort and a sense of stability. Routines are even more important as an emotional anchor in times of uncertainty and instability.

Make time to enjoy yourself.

Feelings of guilt – that you are safe while your loved ones are not – can tempt you to deny yourself the pleasures of life. That won't help your loved ones or you. Take time out from your worries to relax and enjoy yourself. You'll come back with more energy and clearer thinking. You'll be more effective in your support role and might have new ideas for ways to help.

Take care of your health.

- Eat a healthy mix of fresh, unprocessed foods. Keep to regular mealtimes.
- Get the sleep you need. If you're up in the night talking with people in a different time zone, try to adjust your schedule to make time for a later wake-up time or a nap.
- Be physically active. Go to the gym or a yoga class. Get outside for a walk or a run. Any physical activity, even if it's just for a few minutes, can reduce stress and help you stay healthy.
- Avoid unhealthy behaviours, such as stress eating or the use of drugs, tobacco or alcohol.

Find ways to take positive action.

- Look for ways to help the friends and relatives who are in the conflict area, even if those efforts seem small and insufficient. Listen when they share their experiences. Provide emotional support when that is helpful. Provide material support if you can.
- Contribute to broader efforts to end the conflict and to help the people who have been affected by it. Look for organisations that are pushing for solutions and helping people in need. Find out what assistance those organisations can use. Contributing money or volunteering your time to an organisation can make you feel less helpless, and you might be able to make a real difference.
- Spread kindness in your daily life, in your interactions with neighbours, work colleagues and strangers. Performing acts of kindness, entirely unrelated to the distant conflict, is another way to take positive action – and that can help you feel more in control in a world that seems out of control.

Seek help.

If feelings of worry and anxiety are overwhelming, if you have symptoms such as sleeplessness, exhaustion, emotional numbness, irritability or outbursts of anger, seek help from a professional counsellor. Excessive stress can lead to physical and mental health problems, and these can be treated by addressing their causes and learning ways to manage emotions and unproductive habits of thinking. Contact your employee support programme to learn what help is available to you.

Morgan, H. (2022, 28 February). *When you're concerned about loved ones in an area of armed conflict* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

You're Safer, They're Not: Coping with Separation and Guilt in a Crisis

In a crisis such as an armed conflict or a natural disaster, families can be separated when some members move to safety while others remain behind. That separation alone can be traumatic, and it is often combined with other traumas – exposure to violence and risk before and during relocation, loss of property and the unknowns of a chaotic situation.

If you're the one who has moved toward safety, you might feel some relief. You might also feel lonely, scared, confused, exhausted, sad, angry, guilty and a powerful mix of other emotions.

The Body's Reaction to Traumatic Stress

Some of what you may be feeling is your body's natural reaction to trauma. If you have been in danger or worried about loved ones who were, and may still be, in danger, you may be feeling the effects of traumatic stress. These mental and physical reactions can include

- Irritability and anger
- Mood swings
- Lack of motivation
- Trouble concentrating
- Emotional numbness
- Feelings of helplessness and disconnection
- Fear and confusion
- Headaches
- Nausea or loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Obsessive thoughts about your experiences

These reactions can be disturbing. If you are responsible for children or other family members, you'd prefer to be calm and patient. If you've relocated, you'd prefer to be clear-headed as you navigate your new environment. Recognising these signs as indications of trauma can help you be kind to yourself as you recover from your experiences; pace yourself when your energy is limited.

Feelings of Guilt When Loved Ones Remain in Danger

Another emotion natural to separation in times of danger is guilt. If you have moved to a place of relative safety and your partner or other loved ones have remained behind, it's common to feel guilt for your good fortune as you fear for their safety. It's important, though, not to let feelings of guilt hold you back from taking the steps you need to take for yourself and your family.

Questions about why bad things have happened and whether you made the right decisions or did the right thing are natural, but these thoughts can hold you back: They increase your emotional pain at a time when you need to keep yourself functioning and focus on the tasks of putting the pieces of your life together again for the benefit of you and your family.

Ways to Cope with Trauma, Separation and Guilt

- **Recognise and accept your feelings.** Understand that the emotional and physical reactions to trauma are natural and common. Accept that you may have intense and conflicting emotions. Allow yourself to feel painful emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety and grief. Feeling guilty does not mean that you've done anything to cause others to judge you as guilty. It's OK to feel relief at being in a place of relative safety even as you mourn losses and feel genuine concern for people who are still in danger.
- **Give yourself permission and time to grieve.** Trust that you have the strength to feel the sadness of your losses. Let yourself experience your grief. Recognise, too, that the passage through grief takes time and the intensity of your grief can rise and fall in waves.
- **Give yourself permission to be happy, too.** If you feel guilty that people you love remain in danger, don't let that stop you from feeling joy when you can. That might be in happy moments with a child or a friend, the pleasure of a good meal or a walk outside in nice weather. Your loved ones will want you to be happy when you can be, and it won't help them if you suffer on their behalf.
- **Connect with others.** Sharing your experiences and feelings with family, friends and the new people around you can help you process your emotions and recover from trauma. Connecting by phone or online with the people you've left behind can help you feel whole again. Human connections like these are also a way to share practical information about your new environment. Consider joining a support group or talking with a counsellor – whatever feels comfortable for you and is helpful.
- **Challenge unrealistic and unhelpful thinking.** It can be tempting to blame yourself when bad things happen, but it's rarely helpful. Remind yourself of the forces beyond your control that caused the situation, and let go of any feelings of responsibility for those larger events. Friends and family can help you notice unhelpful and unrealistic thinking.
- **Use mindfulness and other grounding exercises.** Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment, setting aside distractions and thoughts of the past or future. By focusing on your breathing, an object or a present feeling, you can let go of worries and accept your current reality.
- **Do what you can to make the situation better.** Feelings of helplessness can be overcome by taking even small actions. Help someone who is in need. Be kind to the people around you. Cook a meal for someone. Make a donation. Educate others on the situation in your country or community. Offer your services as an aide, a translator or using another skill.
- **Take care of yourself.** Don't put yourself at the end of the line for care and attention. Eat regular meals with a mix of nutritious foods. Get outside for walks or physical activity. Get the sleep you need. Make time for activities you enjoy. The more you focus on the things that bring you joy, the more you can train your brain to feel more optimistic and resilient in the face of adversity.
- **Seek help.** It's not a sign of weakness to seek professional help when you are in emotional pain or facing extraordinary challenges. It's a sign of strength and a gift to the people who care about and depend on you. Professional counselling can provide a safe space to share your feelings, talk about your experiences and learn new ways to cope.

Healing from the trauma of your experience may take some time and can be a journey of its own, but for now, focus on finding your resilience and taking care of yourself. Put on your own oxygen mask to be able to take care of the others who are safe with you.

Sharma, M., Baptista de Oliveira, A., & Morgan, H. (2022, 8 March). *You're safer, they're not: Coping with separation and guilt in a crisis* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Steps to Take if You Lose Contact with Someone in Another Country During a Crisis

Communicating with loved ones in another country can be complicated in normal times. In a time of crisis, such as a natural disaster or an armed conflict, communication can be even more difficult. Phone lines may be overwhelmed, power outages may render phones and computers inoperable, or internet access may be cut off or restricted. When you lose contact in a time of crisis, it can be hard to know whether it's because of a problem with the communication system or because something has happened to your loved ones. Here are some ways to make contact with loved ones in a crisis and to find out where they are and whether they are safe.

Use text messaging.

A text message can often get through when a phone call will not. A connection too weak or unsteady for voice or video communication may be strong enough for sending and receiving text messages. Therefore, don't immediately panic or imagine the worst possibilities when your calls don't go through or you don't hear from your loved ones. Try sending a text message and allow time for a response.

Use social media.

If your loved ones have only intermittent access to power or have moved to a safer location, they may still be able to post and view social media messages. Check their social media accounts for recent activity that might tell you where and how they are. Some social media sites have private messaging functions you can use as a way to communicate. You might even post a public message asking for information about your loved ones' wellbeing. If you post a public message, keep it general. Don't give information that might be used by identity thieves or scammers or that might put your loved ones at risk in an armed conflict.

Reach out to others who know your loved ones.

You might be just one of many people concerned about your loved ones' wellbeing, and they might not be able to respond to everyone. Other friends and family members may have information that you don't. If you have contact information for any of your loved ones' local friends, work colleagues or neighbours, call or send messages to see if they know where your loved ones are and whether they are safe. Again, if your loved ones are choosing not to reveal their location out of concern for their safety in an armed conflict, you'll need to be careful in your communications not to say or ask too much.

Contact the local police.

- If the person you are seeking was a visitor to the country where they have gone missing, contact the local police in their home community and file a missing persons report. The police may refer you to your country's consular service or involve them for additional help.
- If the person you are seeking was a resident of the country where they have gone missing, consider contacting the local police where they live. If you contact the police in another country, in a place where a natural disaster has occurred or there is armed conflict, recognise that they may have far more pressing priorities. Be respectful in your inquiries. Even if the local police don't have information about your loved ones, they may be able to tell you about conditions in the community or geographic area.

Reach out to international aid organisations.

- The **International Red Cross or Red Crescent** operates a global aid network across more than 190 countries. Their Restoring Family Links programme, operated through the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), helps reconnect people separated by war, conflict, disaster or migration. The service is free and confidential. Contact your local Red Cross or Red Crescent to find out how to apply to the programme for help in locating someone you love. You can also access the programme online, to begin the process, at <https://familylinks.icrc.org> (site is in English).
- Other aid organisations offer family-tracing and reunification services in specific countries after natural disasters and in times of armed conflict. Identify the aid organisations that are active in the country where your loved ones live or in the countries to which they might have relocated, and find out whether these organisations offer tracing and reunification services.

Morgan, H. (2022, 28 February; Revised 2023, October [Ed.]). *Steps to take if you lose contact with someone in another country during a crisis* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Surviving Survivor Guilt

One of the many emotions survivors of a tragedy experience that is not much talked about – whether it is a natural disaster, an act of violence, an armed conflict or another trauma – is *survivor guilt*. Some survivors feel guilty that they survived when others did not. Others believe they could have done more to save those who died. Some feel guilty that someone died saving them. Survivors are typically left with many unanswered questions: Why did it happen? Why did I escape death while others died? How can I enjoy life when others cannot? Could I have done something that would have changed the outcome?

Survivors tend to hold false beliefs about their role in the tragedy that lead to their feelings of guilt. They may have an exaggerated belief about their ability to change an outcome or cause a negative outcome; they internalise blame and attribute the cause of the tragedy to themselves rather than to things outside their control. They may also ruminate over what happened and what they could have, or should have, done.

The likelihood of experiencing survivor guilt increases if a person has a history of childhood trauma, a history of mental health concerns, or does not have the support of family and friends. People with low self-esteem may place less value on their own wellbeing and are more likely to question whether they 'deserved' their good luck of surviving. Thoughts, such as the following, may occur: 'Why did I survive?' 'I don't deserve to be here', 'If I had done something differently, this wouldn't have happened', and 'I couldn't stop it, so it's all my fault'. According to Colin Ross and Naomi Halpern in their 2009 book, *Trauma Model Therapy*, self-blame compensates for feelings of powerlessness and helplessness; believing that it is one's own fault gives one an illusion of power and a sense of control in being able to prevent something similar from happening again.

Survivor guilt may also cause the person suffering from it to see the world as an unfair and unsafe place and themselves as a bad person deserving of punishment. The person may not seek help, as they believe that they don't deserve to feel better. Sometimes, the pain becomes a way to maintain the bond with their loved ones.

It is important to know that recovery from survivor guilt is not a linear process; the guilt and grief may come in waves. Sometimes, people may start feeling better and then suddenly feel bad again when they hear about another traumatic event.

While some people take longer, most people suffering from survivor guilt improve within a year. There are things one can do to help this journey from grief and guilt to healing:

- It is important to recognise, allow and accept your feelings. Before you accept your feelings, you must accept the reality of the event itself. Remember that these feelings are common. Feeling guilty does not mean that you are guilty. Sadness, fear, anxiety, grief and guilt are normal responses to any tragic event, as is experiencing some relief about your own luck as you mourn the loss of others.
- Give yourself permission and time to grieve, knowing that there is no defined time limit governing when it should be over.
- Share your feelings with family, friends, a counsellor or a support group – whatever works for you. Consider getting professional help to experience some relief and regain control of your life.
- Focusing on the external factors that created or caused the situation can help you let go of the self-blame and guilt.
- Use grounding techniques based on mindfulness principles, like focusing on breathing, feeling nearby fabrics and noticing sounds (among others).
- Learn to forgive yourself – even if you feel that your actions were responsible for harm to another person – because you are human.
- Shift your focus to doing something good for someone else. This could even be a simple thing like donating blood, making a cash donation or giving someone the gift of listening.
- Practise self-care by doing things that feel good and that you enjoy, besides the usual prescription of getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly. The more you focus on the things that bring you joy, the more you can train your brain to feel more optimistic and resilient in the face of adversity. Always remember what makes you happy: What are you passionate about? What are you grateful for? What are you good at? Understand how you can use the answers to these questions to protect your energy and redirect your focus to the things that matter.

Finally, please reach out for support if you, or someone you know, can identify with survivor guilt.

Reference

Ross, C., & Halpern, N. (2009, 1 October). *Trauma model therapy: A treatment approach for trauma dissociation and complex comorbidity*. Richardson, TX: Manitou Communications.

Sharma, M. (2022, 10 February; Revised 2022, 9 March [Eds.]). *Surviving survivor guilt* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options (WPO). Retrieved 7 March 2022 from the WPO Blog: <https://www.workplaceoptions.com>

Coping with Grief After a Sudden or Unexpected Death

The death of someone close to you is never easy to absorb. The emotional reactions can be even more difficult when the death occurs suddenly or unexpectedly.

Why a Sudden or Unexpected Death Is Hard to Process Emotionally

This can happen when a death occurs suddenly or unexpectedly:

- You have no time to prepare for the loss and no opportunity to say goodbye. The loss comes as a shock.
- Your sense of security and order may be shattered. If the death was due to an accident or act of violence, you may feel unsafe. If the person who died was young, you may feel that the natural order of the world has been upset.
- A hole may be left in your life if the person who died was someone you cared deeply about or depended on – a partner, parent, child or sibling. Both your day-to-day life and your vision of your future are suddenly altered. You can be left feeling that your life has lost purpose and meaning.

How People May React to a Sudden or Unexpected Death

Sudden or unexpected loss can lead to intense and long-lasting grief. Reactions may include the following:

- **Shock** – The shock on learning of the loss can cause physical reactions, such as shaking or difficulty breathing. It might cause you to go quiet, scream or moan. Shock is a normal reaction to a sudden or unexpected loss and can make you behave in ways that feel frightening.
- **Disbelief** – You may have a hard time accepting that the person is gone and may speak of them as though they were still alive. You may wake up in the morning expecting them to be with you. This can leave you feeling bewildered, confused or numb.
- **Difficulty performing even simple tasks** – Your feelings of shock and sadness can make it difficult to carry on a conversation, prepare a meal, get dressed or keep your home clean.
- **Feelings of distress, guilt or anger** – It's common to have 'if only...' thoughts after a sudden loss – to ruminate on how the death might have been averted. This can trigger feelings of guilt or anger. It's also common to feel tense and defensive, not wanting to talk about the loss.

These reactions may not follow a reassuring pattern of sadness, resolving toward less intense and more comfortable emotions. You may have a delayed reaction to your grief, feeling little emotion at first, then a painful reaction when you fully realise the loss.

Ways to Cope and Grieve

- **Take care when you are in shock after learning of the loss.** It's easy to make mistakes when in shock. Surround yourself with people who will keep you safe. Avoid driving and other activities that require concentration. Put off decisions that might have long-term consequences until you are able to think more clearly.
- **Allow yourself to feel what may be painful emotions.** If it helps to cry, let yourself cry. Pay attention to your emotions, and accept them as genuine reactions to your loss. There are no 'good' or 'bad' emotions and no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to grieve. Accept painful emotions as testaments to your love for the person who has died.
- **Pay attention to the emotions and needs of your children, too, if they have been affected by the loss.** If, in your grief, you are unable to console them and attend to their needs, arrange for someone to be with them who can, such as a friend or family member.
- **Accept help and support.** Friends, family members and neighbours are usually glad to help. Keep a list of tasks that need to be done. When someone asks how they can help you, refer to the list. If it helps just to have someone with you, let people know that, too. That may be the most important task of all.

- **Share your thoughts and feelings with someone who will listen and be helpful.** That might be a close friend or family member. It might be someone who has experienced a similar loss or trauma, through a support group or an online forum. It might be a spiritual advisor, or it might be a professional psychologist or counsellor.
- **Be kind to yourself.** Make a special effort to take good care of yourself:
 - Eat regular meals with healthy food. If that's difficult at first, try small snacks.
 - Drink plenty of water, perhaps in the form of comforting drinks like herbal tea.
 - Try to keep to a regular sleep schedule.
 - Engage in activities you enjoy.
 - Get outdoors for walks or another form of physical activity.
 - Practise stress-reduction techniques, such as deep breathing, when you feel tense or anxious.
- **Find a way to say goodbye.** Rituals are very important in the grieving process, especially if you weren't able to say goodbye before the person died. In addition to attending a memorial service, you might write a letter to the person, light a candle or talk to a photo. Find a way to say goodbye that has a meaning for you and that helps you understand that the person is not there anymore.
- **Seek professional help from a psychologist or counsellor if you find yourself relying on alcohol or drugs to feel better, if you are concerned about or frightened by your thoughts and emotions, or if you feel that you are at risk of harming yourself.**

This article adapts parts of the article 'Unexpected Death and COVID-19', written by Fabiola Franco and Zelda Meeker.

Morgan, H. (2021, 16 December). *Coping with grief after a sudden or unexpected death* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Secondary Trauma: When You're Affected by Another Person's Traumatic Experience

It's possible to have stress reactions to a traumatic event without experiencing the event yourself. Known as *secondary* or *vicarious trauma*, this can happen when you provide help and assistance to trauma survivors, listen to the stories of people who have experienced trauma or view disturbing images of traumatic events.

What is secondary trauma?

Secondary trauma, also known as *vicarious trauma* or *secondary traumatic stress*, is the indirect trauma a person can experience when exposed to images or stories of other people's traumatic experiences. In secondary or vicarious trauma, a person doesn't directly experience the traumatic event but has a stress reaction from indirect or secondhand exposure.

You might experience secondary trauma as a result of

- Working with victims of violence
- Providing aid and assistance to survivors of a natural disaster

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- Helping a friend or family member cope with the effects of trauma
- Viewing crime scene evidence or listening to courtroom testimony
- Watching graphic news reports on television
- Listening to disturbing stories on the radio

The stress reactions experienced in secondary trauma can be as intense and debilitating as those that occur after the direct experience of trauma.

Who might be affected by secondary trauma?

People in the helping professions – such as social work, medical care, mental health counselling, teaching, emergency response and disaster relief – may be at risk for secondary trauma, as their work can expose them to the stories and effects of traumatic experiences. But they are not the only ones. Lawyers, insurance claim workers, journalists and news editors can be exposed to disturbing stories and images in their work that can trigger traumatic stress reactions.

Friends, partners and family members of trauma victims can also be at risk for secondary trauma, as they try to help a loved one recover from trauma by listening to their stories and providing empathic support. Children of trauma victims can be affected, too, as they grow up listening to stories of a parent's traumatic experiences.

In times of widespread disruption and disaster, as in wartime, people who provide volunteer assistance or take those needing help into their homes may also be exposed to troubling stories that can result in secondary trauma.

Signs of Secondary Trauma

The signs of secondary trauma are similar to those seen in people who have experienced trauma directly. These may include

- Physical symptoms, such as
 - Exhaustion
 - Headaches
 - Trouble sleeping (insomnia)
 - Loss of appetite
 - Recurring illness (reduced immune response)
- Behavioural symptoms, such as
 - Increased alcohol or substance use
 - Stress eating
 - Anger or irritability
 - Overwork, absenteeism, or avoidance of certain work or clients
 - Problems in personal relationships
- Psychological symptoms, such as
 - Recurring thoughts of the other person's traumatic experience
 - Loss of a sense of safety
 - Irrational fears
 - Excessive wariness and attention to risk (hypervigilance)
 - Reduced ability to feel empathy
 - Loss of a sense of control or an increased need to control events or other people
 - Loss of pleasure in daily activities

Ways to Cope with Secondary Trauma

Pay attention to the signs of traumatic stress.

When you notice the stress effects of secondary trauma, take steps to calm yourself and redirect your thoughts.

Take care of yourself.

- Engage in regular physical activity – walking, running, dance, yoga or another activity you enjoy.
- Get the sleep and rest you need.
- Calm yourself with mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing, spending time in nature or another method that works for you.

Connect with others.

Talk about your feelings with people you trust – your partner, close friends or colleagues, or family members.

Engage in a creative activity.

Write, paint, make music, cook or engage in another creative activity that absorbs your full attention.

Reflect on the value of your work and the support you are providing.

Remind yourself of the value of the help you are providing to other people, and allow yourself to feel pride in your work and the actions that you're taking.

When to Seek Help

Seek professional help when your efforts at self-calming and the support of friends, family and colleagues aren't enough to manage your traumatic stress reactions. Evidence-based treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy and cognitive processing therapy can help control secondary traumatic stress reactions. Medications used to treat depression and anxiety may also help. Your primary care doctor or your employee support programme can help you find a professional therapist with experience in treating stress reactions related to trauma.

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Morgan, H. (2022, 17 June). *Secondary trauma: When you're affected by another person's traumatic experience* (E. Morton & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Being Supportive to Someone Who Has Experienced Trauma

When a person experiences trauma, caring and appropriate support from the people around them can help them heal and move forward. One model that has proven effective for providing this support is called

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psychological first aid. Just as medical first aid is needed when someone is physically injured, psychological first aid can help people who have been emotionally wounded by trauma.

The basic principles of psychological first aid are relatively simple. Most come naturally in caring relationships, whether among friends, family members, work colleagues, or in the relationship between a displaced person and a housing host.

Understand the effects of trauma.

As a first step, it helps to understand the range of emotional reactions a person can have in response to trauma. These can include

- Irritability and anger
- Mood swings
- Lack of motivation
- Trouble concentrating
- Emotional numbness
- Feelings of helplessness and disconnection
- Fear and confusion
- Headaches
- Nausea or loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Obsessive thoughts about the traumatic experiences

These reactions can be disturbing, both to the person who has them and to you, as a friend, family member, work colleague or housing host. Recognising these signs as indications of trauma can help you be kind and patient as the person you are trying to support recovers from their experiences.

Here are ways to use psychological first aid in supporting others.

Here are some ways you can apply the principles of psychological first aid in being supportive to a person who has experienced trauma.

Help them feel safe, welcomed and important.

A sense of physical safety is important in recovering from trauma. Do what you can to make your home (if you are a family member or housing host) or the workplace (if you are a work colleague) feel safe and far removed from the trauma the person has experienced. Pay attention to physical security, jarring sounds and other factors that might trigger disturbing memories and fears.

Just as important is a sense of emotional safety. Make your relationship with the person you are trying to help one of emotional comfort and safety, without pressure, judgement or criticism:

- Make the person feel welcome and important. Show that you are happy to have them in your home, that you value them as a friend or colleague, and that they matter to you as a person.
- Be present and available. Even if the person doesn't want to talk, it can be comforting to have someone with them – even simply nearby or available by phone if they prefer to be alone most of the time.
- Listen when they are ready to talk. Don't push the person to talk about their experiences, but be available to listen if they want to talk about them – or if they want to talk about anything else. Put aside other distractions when the person is open to talking. If their talk is tearful, angry or otherwise emotional, don't be

afraid or pull back. Be calm, keep listening and show that you are there for the person as a comforting presence. Statements like, 'This must be so hard for you', or 'I can't even imagine what you've been through', show that you are listening and that you care.

- Avoid simple reassurances. While they might seem to be comforting, statements like, 'Things could have been worse', 'It's not so bad', 'Stop worrying' or 'Look on the bright side', aren't usually helpful. They can convey that you don't believe or respect the pain the person has experienced. In the same way, statements like, 'I know how you feel' or 'You'll be OK', can feel dismissive. You don't know how the person feels, and you hope, but don't know, that they'll be OK.
- Accept that the person's emotional reactions are real and valid. A person who has experienced trauma may have what seem to be exaggerated or unrealistic fears and other strong emotional reactions. Accept the person's reactions as genuinely felt. They are the person's real experience. Don't criticise or find fault with the person for having those reactions. Reassure them that what they are feeling – even if it's numbness or an absence of feeling – is a natural reaction to the trauma they have experienced.
- Help them be and feel connected. Be available to the person for conversation and human connection, but don't be offended if they want to talk to close family members or friends instead of you. Help them make those connections. In the workplace, that might mean allowing flexibility during the workday for personal and private conversations with people outside of work.
- Be kind, patient and forgiving. A person who has experienced trauma can be moody, withdrawn, angry or tearful at times. Don't take this as a reaction to you. Instead, understand it as a natural reaction to the trauma they have experienced. Give the person time, space and privacy to work through these traumatic reactions. Don't let your own emotions provoke you into a cold or angry response.
- Don't push or hurry the person to get better or move on. It can take months or longer to recover from trauma.
- Understand that the person may not know what they need and may not ask for help. Don't assume that silence, indecision or emotional numbness are indications a person has no need for help. Without pushing it, show that you have not abandoned them and are available to help when they need it. Keep asking, gently and without pestering, what you can do that might be helpful.

Help them feel calm and comfortable.

- Make the environment as comfortable as possible. Provide places to rest and private space for them to be alone.
- Be sure regular meals and healthy snacks are available, including food options the person finds comforting.
- Establish routines, with regular mealtimes, breaks for rest, times for physical activity, and regular times to wind down at night and get up in the morning. Don't force the person to follow these routines, just provide them as a framework for daily life.
- Encourage the person to do things that make them feel good, and help them get the rest and physical activity they need. That might be taking a walk outside, reading a book or taking a nap.
- Respect the person's privacy. Allow them to be alone when they choose to be and silent when they don't want to talk.
- Pay attention to media exposure. Talk with the person to find out how much news and opinion they want to see and hear. They may feel the need to keep up with news, but it might be helpful to manage that exposure so it isn't a continuing source of trauma.

Help them connect with practical and social supports.

A person who has experienced trauma may not always think clearly or have the energy to deal with the many challenges they face. You can help by offering your own problem-solving skills and your knowledge of available support systems:

- Ask how you can help the person get any information and support they may need. Without pushing them, help them find out about services that may be available to them. Those might include
 - Information about housing options and jobs, either where they are or in other locations
 - Options for moving to another part of the country or to another country
 - Legal requirements for living outside their country or moving to another country
 - Financial support to help with the costs of housing, daily living or travel
 - Professional mental health counselling
- If it might be helpful, offer to help them locate or stay connected with distant friends and family members, especially people they may have left behind in an area of danger.

Help them regain a sense of control.

- Don't take over in your efforts to be helpful. Among the reactions to trauma can be feelings of helplessness and loss of control. Taking even small steps on their own can help a person start to heal from trauma by rebuilding a sense of personal control. Share information you find about help and support options without pushing them or suggesting the person needs them.
- Give advice only if you're asked for it. Offer encouragement rather than instructions. Reassure the person that you are there for, care about and believe in them.
- As appropriate, help the person think of coping strategies that have worked for them in the past. That might be deep breathing, spending time in nature or any other healthy steps (not alcohol or drugs) they have used before to feel calmer and think more clearly.
- Encourage the person to try a creative activity. Activities such as drawing, painting, writing, sewing, knitting, gardening, woodworking, dance and music can help a person engage their mind and body in an activity that is pleasurable and that they can control. An activity that brought joy to the person before the trauma may help bring it again. Help by providing needed supplies and space.
- Help the person consider what they can do to help themselves or others. Taking even small steps is empowering when a person feels that their life has no direction or feels out of control. Taking care of oneself is an important small step. Helping others can begin to restore a sense of meaning and purpose to life.
- As appropriate, encourage the person to get additional emotional support. That might be through talking with other trusted friends and family members, or it might be through talking with a professional counsellor. Respect that this is their decision. Choosing help in healing is another way for a person to regain a sense of control, and professional counselling is more effective when a person makes their own decision to seek that help.

Take care of yourself.

Hearing about trauma and seeing its effects on a person who is close to you can be traumatic in its own way. You may have your own emotional reactions to the stories you are told. You may become exhausted from your efforts to be a calm, caring and patient helper. It's important to take care of your own mental health as you take steps to help another person. Stay in contact with supportive friends, get plenty of rest, be physically active, and engage in activities that bring you joy and help you relax. Don't hesitate to reach out for emotional support when you need it. Your employee assistance programme is one source for this support. Your doctor (GP) can also help you find a professional counsellor.

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Helping Children Cope with Trauma When You Feel Its Effects Yourself

Exposure to dangerous and violent situations can lead to emotional and physical reactions in both children and adults. When you experience trauma with your children, you face the challenge of helping them cope with difficult thoughts, memories and emotions while you, too, feel the effects of what has happened. How can you calm your children when you are not calm yourself?

Calm and strengthen yourself.

It's important to recognise your own reactions to what has happened or is happening. It's true that your children need you, but they also need you to be strong. If you pay attention only to their needs or the needs of others, you risk undermining and weakening yourself when you need to be thinking clearly and making smart decisions – for their sake and your own. Because your children depend on you, it's important to take steps to calm and strengthen yourself:

- **Observe what is going on with your body.** Mentally scan your body: Do you have headaches, stomach aches, or pain in your neck or back? Are your abdominal muscles tense? Are you extra alert or exhausted? These are among the natural physical reactions to trauma.
- **Pay attention to your emotions.** Are you feeling anxious, angry, sad, fearful or emotionally numb? These and many other emotional reactions are also natural in the face of trauma and are closely linked to your physical reactions.
- **Accept your physical and emotional reactions as real and valid.** You may wish you were happy and relaxed, but those feelings may be unrealistic right now.
- **Find ways to be alone.** Sometimes you simply need to be by yourself. Try to find someone to watch your children, even if it's just for a short time, and let yourself be alone.
- **Use calming and grounding techniques.** Reduce your tension when you feel panicky or frozen or when you are so sad, angry or fearful that you can't think clearly or be supportive to your child:
 - Breathe deeply. Count slowly to four as you inhale deeply through your nose and to four again as you slowly exhale through your mouth. As you breathe, feel the tension leaving your body. Humming to yourself can also calm your breathing, with an added calming effect from the music.
 - Move your body. Take a walk or run, dance or stretch. Physical activity gets your circulation going and can help you shift your mind to different thoughts.
 - Splash your face with cold water, or take a warm bath or shower. The sensation of cold water on your skin can interrupt feelings of overheated anxiety, while the feeling of warm water can soothe and relax.
 - Give yourself a hug, hug your child (if hugs are welcome), massage your neck or tap your fingers gently on your chest while your arms are crossed. All of these are ways to feel the calming effects of touch.

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- Use the *5-4-3-2-1 technique* to tune in to your senses. Notice five things around you that you can see, four that you can feel, three that you can hear, two that you can smell and one that you can taste.
- **Ask for help.** That might be help with practical tasks, like shopping, cooking or the logistics of your next steps, or it might be help in dealing with your emotional reactions to the trauma. A good friend can help you talk through your feelings. A professional counsellor can help if you are stuck in negative thinking or if your emotional reactions are hurting your ability to function.

Your goal is not to be completely relaxed and happy. That's not realistic right now. Instead, work on calming yourself enough that you can be a calming, reassuring presence for your children while also thinking clearly, being alert to real risks and dangers, and taking steps to keep your family safe.

Understand how your children might be reacting to the trauma.

Every person reacts to trauma in different ways. It's natural to feel unsafe, afraid, angry, sad or confused, or to feel a mix of conflicting emotions. But how and when these feelings are expressed can vary tremendously from person to person. Some children, like some adults, may be tearful or have angry outbursts, while others may be withdrawn or emotionally numb. Some children may show emotional effects of the trauma right away, while for others the reaction may come days or weeks later. Beyond those individual reactions, children respond to trauma differently at different ages:

- **Young children** may be clingy, have trouble sleeping or be irritable.
- **School-age children** may have irrational fears, feel responsible for what has happened, act out or misbehave, or become extremely upset at times.
- **Teenagers** may feel helpless, see the world as an unsafe place, be angry at the unfairness of what has happened, feel guilt or shame, have trouble concentrating or engage in impulsive behaviours.
- **Children of any age** may regress to younger behaviours, no longer find pleasure in activities they once enjoyed, or feel their emotions in the form of headaches or stomach aches. Other children may act like 'little adults' at the cost of their mental health and sense of safety (a 'paternalised' reaction).

Ways to Help Children Cope with Emotional and Physical Reactions to Trauma

- **Pay attention to and validate your children's emotions.** Accept them as natural reactions to a difficult experience. Validate them as genuinely felt, part of the child's real experience, not something to hide or be ashamed of. Ignoring or dismissing their emotions can lead children to feel even more lost, alone and afraid.
- **Do your best to be patient.** Understand that behaviours that can seem irritating or bothersome to you may be part of a child's emotional reaction to trauma. Regression to younger behaviours, clinging, acting out and misbehaviour are common childhood reactions to trauma.
- **Don't worry if your child's reactions are different from yours, or from each other's.** One child might cry while another might not. One child might be withdrawn while another might be talkative and needy. Give them time to process their emotions while providing them with comfort and a sense of safety.
- **Soothe and comfort your children** with hugs, by letting them stay close to you, by singing to them or by telling a story. Provide extra reassurance that you are with them and will stay with them, and that when you go out, you will come back.
- **Show your child simple self-soothing techniques.** Many of the calming techniques for adults can work for children as well. Show them how you calm yourself with deep breathing, and practise together. Show your child how hugging a pillow or sitting with a pet can be soothing. Hum a song together, and show your child how humming to themselves can help them feel calmer.

- **Encourage your children to talk about how they are feeling.** Ask open-ended questions (ones that can't be answered with just a 'yes' or 'no') and listen to what your children tell you. Ask them to tell you how they are feeling and where they are feeling it in their body. Use inviting phrases to encourage them to talk, like 'Would you like to talk about it?'; 'Can you tell me more about that?'; 'I'm interested' and 'Go ahead, I'm listening.'
- **Listen.** Make the time to listen when your children want to talk. Listen to learn and understand. Don't feel the need to respond to everything they say with an answer or solution. There may be none. Healing for the child starts with being heard, understood and loved.
- **Be available.** If your child doesn't want to talk at first, that's OK. Try again later. Be available by staying physically close to them.
- **Be honest in answering their questions, but don't overwhelm them with more information than they are asking for.** Young children, in particular, may have limited or distorted concepts of what is happening. When they ask you questions, first find out what they know or think, then help address their concern with appropriate information. Be honest, too, in saying that you don't have answers when you don't. Explain that you are doing your best to find out and will tell them when you know more.
- **Encourage young children to tell the story of what has happened through their play.** Play-acting can be a way for them to work through their memories and emotions. If you play out their stories with them, you can learn what they are feeling and what worries them.
- **Spend more time together.** Come up with activities that you all enjoy, ones that can distract you all from disturbing thoughts or feelings and perhaps bring some smiles and laughs.
- **Do what you can to establish daily routines.** Consistent morning and bedtime routines and regular meals can be an anchor and a comfort in a disrupted world.
- **Encourage your children to write, draw or express their thoughts and feelings in creative ways.** This can help children process difficult experiences and emotions and may give you insight into their concerns.
- **Talk about what's good, using concrete examples.** Remind your children that your cat is still with you, for example, or that you brought their backpacks. Tell them of people you read or hear about who are helping others and working to make things better.
- **Don't expect empathy from your children right now.** They're scared and focused on survival. They want to know that you are there for them. They don't have the ability right now to be there for you. Don't expect them to be brave for your sake, either. Be brave for them, and let them discover their own inner strength as they get through this difficult time.

When a Child May Need Additional Help

Just as you might benefit from additional help in processing your reactions to what you've experienced, so might a child. Seek the help of a professional counsellor if a child or adolescent

- Displays aggressive emotional outbursts long after the traumatic situation has ended
- Withdraws completely from family and friends
- Is unable to cope with routine problems or daily activities
- Engages in vandalism or illegal activities
- Expresses suicidal ideas

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness. A professional counsellor can offer solutions that may not be known to you.

This article has been reviewed by Galina Itskovich, Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)-R, Master of Social Work (MSW), Bachelor's in Psychology; and Maullika Sharma, Certified Employee Assistance Programme (CEAP) Professional, National Board–Certified Health and Wellness Coach (NBC-HWC), Masters in Counselling Psychology.

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Morgan, H., Itskovich, G., & Sharma, M. (2022, 8 April). *Helping children cope with trauma when you feel its effects yourself* (E. Morton & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Helping Someone You Love Who Has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Traumatic experiences – such as sexual or physical abuse, natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, forest fires), human-made disasters (plane crashes, bombings, accidents) and military combat – can evoke significant symptoms of distress. When these intense emotional reactions endure, they can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When someone you love has PTSD, it doesn't just affect them. It can also affect you and the other people in their life. Behaviours and emotions characteristic of PTSD – such as fear, hypervigilance, mistrust, moodiness, withdrawal and anger – can make it hard for you to be calm, patient and loving. PTSD can also have physical symptoms, including increased blood pressure and heart rate, fatigue, muscle tension, nausea, joint pain and headaches.

Your loved one's behaviours and their emotional and physical symptoms can leave you feeling helpless and sometimes hurt, but there are ways you can help while also caring for yourself. Your love and support can be important in helping your loved one heal.

Ways to Help Someone with PTSD

- **Learn about PTSD.** Educate yourself on the symptoms of PTSD, how it affects people and how it is treated. Being informed can help you understand what your loved one is going through and why they act the way they do.
- **Ask how you can help.** Don't assume that your ideas for helping your loved one are the best ones or even that they will be welcome. Ask how you can be helpful, and respect your loved one's preferences. Accept that your loved one may not want your help, and try not to take it personally. Withdrawal and mistrust are

common symptoms of PTSD. Engage with your loved one in ways that are comfortable for them, recognising that trauma is experienced in many ways.

- **Encourage treatment.** PTSD is a serious mental health issue that typically requires professional treatment. You can't make someone get treatment, but by being a supportive and trusted presence in their life and by knowing about treatment options that have proved effective – such as eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR), exposure therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy – you can help guide your loved one to the help they need.
- **Spend time with your loved one in ordinary day-to-day activities.** Prepare meals or watch a movie together. Play games or do puzzles together. Spend time with mutual friends. Your support can help your loved one reestablish a regular routine, which aids in reconnection with self and others.
- **Engage in physical activities together.** Go for walks, runs or bike rides together. Swim, dance, go rock climbing or take a yoga class together. Physical activity has tremendous benefits for physical and mental health – both for you and your loved one – and it's a great way to spend time together.
- **Encourage contact with family and close friends.** Social support can play a huge role in overcoming PTSD, which is why your help and engagement are so important to your loved one. Encourage them to broaden that support by rebuilding and strengthening other connections that may have weakened.
- **Help your loved one rebuild trust and a sense of safety.** Let them know you're there for them now and for the long term. Learn what makes them feel safe and how you can help them cope with stress reactions. Talk with them about the future, and make plans together. Help them settle into predictable daily routines.
- **Help them build their confidence and sense of control** by encouraging them to make decisions and handle tasks themselves. Remind them regularly of their strengths and what makes them special.
- **Understand your loved one's triggers.** One characteristic of PTSD is that certain places, situations, sounds, smells or feelings can trigger intense stress reactions. Talk to your loved one to learn what triggers their stress reactions and to understand how you can help them cope if they encounter those triggers while you are with them. You might offer a hug, words of reassurance or help in using grounding or relaxation techniques. (Note that this does not mean shielding your loved one from all triggers. Let them decide how and when to engage with things that may cause fear or anxiety.)

Communication Tips

- **Be a good listener.** Don't interrupt or disagree. Listen to understand. Repeat what you've heard, and ask questions to be sure you've understood correctly. Don't feel that you need to solve your loved one's problems or come up with solutions. Just listen and show that you're hearing.
- **Don't push your loved one to talk.** Some people with PTSD find it painful to talk about their traumatic experience and difficult to describe what they are going through. Let them know that you're available to listen if and when they are ready to talk.
- **Be patient.** A person with PTSD may need to talk about their traumatic experience over and over again. Don't show your impatience or tell them to stop worrying about the past. Talking through what has happened can be part of their healing process; by listening, you can help them heal.
- **Accept your loved one's reactions as real.** Don't dismiss their fears as unrealistic or their stress reactions as unreasonable. Avoid unhelpful and dismissive statements like 'It could have been worse' or 'You'll be fine'. Difficult thoughts and emotions and intense stress reactions are the reality of a person with PTSD. If they could move on from them or get over them easily, they would.
- **Don't judge or show your disapproval.** Some of the things your loved one tells you may be difficult to hear. Accept that their traumatic experience is their reality. Listen with empathy and without judgment so they know it's safe to share their stories, thoughts and feelings with you.
- **Suggest a break** when you sense the conversation is becoming too intense for your loved one. If they agree, be sure to follow through and continue the conversation at another time.

Dealing with Anger or Violent Behaviour

Anger is a common reaction to trauma and can be a characteristic of PTSD:

- **If your loved one has angry outbursts**, agree together, when you are both calm, on ways to defuse these situations. One way is to set up a time-out system:
 - Agree on a signal that either of you can use – perhaps a word or hand signal – to indicate that you need a time-out to step away from the situation or conversation.
 - Let each other know where you'll be and what you'll be doing during the time-out and when you'll come back.
 - After the time-out, take turns offering solutions to the problem without interrupting each other.
 - Use 'I' statements ('I think...' or 'I feel') rather than 'you' statements, which can be heard as accusations.
 - Listen to each other's ideas without criticizing them.
 - Together, decide which solution you'll try.
- **If your loved one's anger leads to violent behaviour or abuse**, you need to go to a safe place – away from the home or in a locked room – and call for help. If you have children, make sure they are in a safe place as well.

Take care of yourself.

Helping someone with PTSD can be draining. To sustain the energy and patience for that support, and to maintain your own physical and mental health, you need to take care of yourself:

- Eat healthy meals.
- Engage in regular physical activity.
- Get the sleep and rest you need.
- Share the helping role by asking friends and family members to help in ways that allow you to take a break.
- Set boundaries for yourself that acknowledge your limits and give you time to attend to your own needs.
- Spend time on activities you enjoy.
- Spend time with close friends – people who aren't connected with your loved one's trauma, who can make you laugh and with whom you can share your feelings.
- Take time to be by yourself.

Seek help.

Recognise that hearing stories of trauma can cause you to have traumatic stress reactions, as can being around someone whose behaviour is unpredictable or abusive and whose emotions are volatile. Help options for you include

- Professional therapy to help you manage stress, deal with difficult emotions and learn ways to attend to your own needs
- Support groups with others who are helping a loved one with PTSD
- Family therapy to talk about how the family is affected by helping the person with PTSD and learn ways to share the responsibility, provide more effective help, and meet the needs of all family members

Morgan, H. (2022, 28 June). *Helping someone you love who has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* (E. Morton & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Coping with Feelings of Isolation and Alienation in Times of International Conflict

In times of international tension and armed conflict, people sometimes have a tendency to hold ordinary people to blame for the actions of their governments. National emotions and anger become personal. When you are on the receiving end of that blame and hostility, the experience can be painful. People you consider friends may no longer talk to you. Work colleagues may avoid you or treat you with coldness.

These tendencies are deeply rooted in human nature, and the problems they create can't easily be 'solved' the way some personal challenges can be. However, there are some steps you can take to help yourself feel less isolated and give yourself the strength to carry on.

Put things in perspective.

When personal conflicts arise, it can be helpful to try to see things through the other person's eyes and understand the context of the behaviour. That's not to excuse rude or inappropriate behaviour, and certainly not hostile words or actions, but putting things in perspective can help you choose your response.

When a nation's government or its leaders act in ways that cause harm or are perceived to cause harm, it's natural for the people offended or hurt by those actions to assign blame to the people of that country.

If you agree with your government's actions, understand that others can have different opinions. Understand, too, that people may be responding to different information. What you see, hear and read about the situation may be very different from what others see, hear and read.

If you disagree with your government's actions, understand that people outside your country may hold you responsible for enabling your government to have and hold power. It's true that the people of a country bear some responsibility for the government that leads them. They generally have more of a role to play in determining who their leaders are than people outside the country. However, it's not true that every person in a country supports all of their government's actions.

People outside of your country may not recognise other factors that may be at play – the political situation, for example, or restrictions on protests or freedom of expression. Accept that others may not understand your reality. Try not to blame them for their lack of understanding or react with your own hostility to their words or behaviour.

Recognise and accept your emotional reactions.

If you are feeling isolated and alienated as a consequence of world events, it can be helpful to recognise and accept your emotions:

- It's natural to feel hurt when friends snub or reject you. The drive to belong and be part of a community is one of the most basic human urges. Exclusion from a community is one of the oldest forms of punishment.
- If you do not support your government's actions, it's natural to feel guilty about harms they may be causing. Your government is supposed to be expressing the will of its people, and you are one of those people.
- It's natural to feel angry at the unfairness of your situation.
- Other emotional reactions can include anxiety, fear, sorrow, grief, and apathy or emotional numbness.

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Experiencing these and other powerful emotions is an indication of your humanity, not a sign that something is wrong with you.

Recognise your emotions for what they are: natural reactions to a terrible situation. Accept them, as uncomfortable as they may be. Understand, too, that it can take time to process strong emotions.

Choose your response.

You can't control the actions of other people. You can't control world events. You may not be able to control how you feel in reaction to those actions and events, but it's important to remember that you can choose your response.

Connect with the people who are available to you.

Human connection is necessary to emotional health. Supportive friends help you through down times and give you a lift when you need it. Connections with others are also important in solving problems and understanding reality. Friends and family share practical information. They can challenge you when your thinking is distorted or unrealistic.

If you are temporarily cut off from some people in your social network, strengthen the connections that remain. Reach out to the people who are available to you. Those might be neighbours and local friends. They might be supportive members of your family. They might be work colleagues with whom you are still in communication. They might be others who share your situation and with whom you can connect on social media.

Be careful, of course, if communication is monitored and the expression of certain views is dangerous. Where that is a risk, use your communication for emotional and practical support that won't draw unwanted attention.

Take care of yourself.

Eat regular meals with a mix of nutritious foods. Get outside for walks or physical activity. Get the sleep you need. Make time for activities you enjoy. The more you focus on the things that bring you joy, the more you can train your brain to feel more optimistic and resilient in the face of adversity.

Use mindfulness and other grounding exercises to help stay calm. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment, setting aside distractions and thoughts of the past or future. By focusing on your breathing, an object or a present feeling, you can let go of regrets about the past and worries about the future and accept your current reality.

Remind yourself of what's good about your country and culture.

You may feel that it's not just you who is being rejected and criticised, but your country and your culture. If you do not support your government's actions, you may feel that you've lost pride in your national or cultural identity. That can add to your sense of loss. Expressing that pride to international friends right now can be read as defensive or even hostile, especially to those who have been hurt by your government's actions. However, reminding yourself of the positive aspects of your heritage can help you weather this difficult time.

Do what you can to make the situation better.

Feelings of isolation and helplessness can be overcome by taking even small actions. Help someone who is in need. Be kind to the people around you. Cook a meal for someone. Explain the value of international

communication at a person-to-person level. Offer your services as an aide, a translator or using another skill. Look for opportunities to influence your country's actions.

[Seek help.](#)

It's not a sign of weakness to seek professional help when you are in emotional pain or facing extraordinary challenges. It's a sign of strength and a gift to the people who care about and depend on you. Professional counselling can provide a safe space to share your feelings, talk about your experiences and learn new ways to cope.

Morgan, H. (2022, 16 March). *Coping with feelings of isolation and alienation in times of international conflict* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Coping with the Stress of Emergency Relocation

Wildfires, floods, storms, wars, and other natural and man-made disasters can force people from their homes. Sometimes that evacuation is temporary, and a return is possible once the danger has passed. Sometimes the relocation is long-lasting or even permanent, as when a home is destroyed or the risk of violence makes return impossible. If you have been forced from your home by violence or disaster, this article offers guidance on ways to cope with the stress and trauma you may be feeling.

[The Stress and Trauma of Forced Relocation](#)

Emergency or forced relocation is not a move made by choice. It is often made under extreme time pressure and sometimes in the face of danger. Factors that contribute to the stress and trauma of emergency relocation include

- Disruption of daily routines
- Separation from family and friends
- Worries about the safety of people who have been or remain at risk
- Worries about the condition of your home and your evacuated community
- Grief over the loss of belongings
- Financial loss and the pressure of unanticipated expenses
- Concern about pets
- Discomfort and lack of privacy in emergency housing

Forced relocation can be even more traumatic in the following circumstances:

- Family members or friends die.
- Violence is witnessed or experienced.
- People are forced to flee to another country.
- Refugees are made to feel unwelcome in their temporary homes or shelters.
- A temporary refuge comes to feel permanent.

Any of these experiences can be distressing. In combination, they can leave you feeling shocked, confused, anxious and deeply unhappy. You might respond with wild swings of emotion, laughing one minute and crying the next. These short-term reactions are normal. Everyone reacts in their own way to experiences of disruption and loss. Here are some strategies to help you cope – both in the early days of your relocation and in the longer term – as you adjust to unplanned changes in your life.

Coping Strategies After an Emergency or Forced Relocation

There may be no way to make your emergency relocation easy or comfortable, and grief over any losses you've experienced may take time to process. Below are some key coping strategies that can help you get through a difficult time.

Stay connected.

- Take time to be with and attend to the needs of the people who are with you in your new location. You can help each other cope by sharing stories of what you have been through, talking about your feelings and making practical plans together. Do what you can to lift the emotions of the people around you, even as you acknowledge the pain and loss you and they may be feeling.
- Use technology to stay connected with the people you are now separated from. Schedule regular times to talk by phone or video. They may be able to help you in practical ways, and you may be able to help them. You can certainly lift each other's spirits just by keeping in close touch.

Establish a daily routine.

Find new activities to build into a regular routine. The predictability of a daily routine can make your temporary life more comfortable for both children and adults. Prepare meals at regular times. Go for a daily walk together. Read bedtime stories. They might not be the same activities you'd do at home, but a regular routine can be an emotional anchor after a significant disruption.

Lean on your spiritual beliefs and practices.

If prayer or reading a religious text is part of your life, let that be a comfort to you now. If you find release and relaxation in nature, yoga, meditation or something else, make room for those practices in your daily routine if you can.

Get involved in productive activities.

- Make your new space as comfortable as possible, using whatever decorations and furniture you have.
- Volunteer to help out in your shelter or temporary community by preparing group meals, organising activities or helping others establish connections with the people they have been separated from.
- Get older children involved in caring for and playing with younger children, until new school and childcare routines can be established.

Learn about and engage with your new community.

- Explore your new community. Learn the best places to get food and other necessities. Make an effort to meet people and make new friends, even if you don't think you'll be staying long.
- If you've migrated to another country, learn the language. Find out who can help you learn about long-term housing and the health care system. Find out about your options for work.

Stay positive.

It's normal to grieve your losses, but make an effort to look at the positive sides of your situation, too. Think about the good that might come of this disruption in your life, how new experiences or opportunities might benefit you, your children or the other people you love.

Seek and accept help.

- Use counselling services if they are offered.
- Ask for help in navigating the practical issues of living in your new home. That might be help in applying for relief aid or insurance payments for your material losses. If you've relocated to another country, you might need help learning the language, understanding the school and health care systems or learning about your options for work.

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Helping Young People Cope with the Stress of Emergency or Forced Relocation

If you and your family have been forced from your home by violence or disaster, this article offers guidance on ways to help your children cope with the stress they may be feeling.

How Emergency or Forced Relocation Can Affect Children

- Damage, injuries and deaths that result from an unexpected or uncontrollable event are difficult for most young people to understand.
- Following a disaster or violent event, a young person's view of the world as safe and predictable is temporarily lost. (This is true of adults as well.)
- Young people express their feelings and reactions in various ways, especially in different age groups. Many are confused about what has happened and about their feelings. Not every child has immediate reactions; some can have delayed reactions that show up days, weeks or even months later; and some may never have

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a reaction. Children's reactions are strongly affected by the emotional reactions of their parents and the adults around them.

- Young people can easily become afraid that a similar event will happen again or that violence will reach them even after relocation, and that they or their family will be injured or killed.

How Young People Show Stress

It is normal for young people to show signs of stress after a disaster or exposure to violence or danger. Young people show signs of stress differently at different ages.

Preschool-age children may

- Have trouble sleeping
- Cling to adults more than usual
- Be irritable
- Not enjoy activities they normally enjoy
- Complain of stomach aches or other illnesses

School-age children may

- Have irrational fears or nightmares
- Become extremely upset for little or no reason
- Misbehave, engage in disruptive behaviour or have problems in school
- Not enjoy activities they normally enjoy
- Complain of stomach aches or headaches with no associated illness
- Feel guilt or shame and feel responsible for what has happened
- Feel emotionally numb

Teenagers may

- Feel fearful or helpless and see the world as an unsafe place
- Feel guilt or shame about what has happened
- Be concerned about being viewed as different or abnormal by friends and classmates
- Engage in impulsive behaviours
- Have trouble concentrating
- Not enjoy activities they normally enjoy
- Feel emotionally numb

Helping Young People Understand a Disaster or Act of Violence

Disasters or acts of violence can hit young people hard. It is difficult for them to understand and accept that there are events in their lives that cannot be controlled or predicted. When facing an unknown and potentially dangerous situation, young people usually look to adults for answers and help. Talk with young people at a level in line with their age. Children handle information differently at different ages. Preschool-age children cannot handle as much information as teenagers.

Before you, as an adult, can help young people cope with a disaster, it is important for you to recognise your own natural feelings of helplessness, fear and anger, if these exist. Until this occurs, you will not be able to give a young person the full emotional help they need. Nothing is wrong with letting young people know that you do not have all the answers. Things that can be done immediately include the following:

- Let young people know how you see the family situation improving – for example, your plans for their school, your work and family housing.
- Communicate a positive 'I'm not helpless' attitude, stressing that 'we can get through this together'.
- Ask for parenting or other help if the situation gets beyond your abilities and control.

These actions will start the healing process and help young people to feel relief in knowing the family will regain control and restore their lives.

Ways to Help Young People Manage Stress

For Preschool-Age Children

- Reassure young children that the event that pushed you from your home was not their fault in any way.
- Talk with children about how they are feeling, and listen without judgment.
- Let children know they can have their own feelings, which may be different from the feelings of others.
- Let children take their own time to figure things out.
- Do not expect children to be brave or ask them to pretend that they do not think or feel as they do.
- Give preschoolers small bits of information in answer to their questions. Too much information can confuse them.

For School-Age Children and Teenagers

- Return to former routines of bedtime, eating and so forth, as soon as possible. If this is not possible, develop new routines. The structure of a routine provides security and assurance.
- Do not expect children to be brave or tough or not to cry.
- Do not minimise the event or the disruption of the family's relocation.
- Hug your children. Hugging lets your children know that someone is there for them.
- Allow special privileges, such as leaving the light on when they sleep.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, listen to music and talk quietly.
- Children, just like adults, cope better when healthy. Make sure children are getting balanced meals, proper exercise and enough rest.
- Find ways to emphasise to your children that you love them.
- Encourage children and adolescents to feel in control by letting them choose which clothes to wear, food to eat at meals and so forth.
- Encourage your teenager to talk one on one with a trusted adult or in a small group of peers about the event and the disruption of relocation. Generally, this is most successful when you begin with general events, move to more event-specific experiences and then follow with each person's experiences of what has happened.
- Teenagers may wish to talk about values, moral issues and the meaning of the disaster or act of violence.

When Young People May Need Additional Help

Situations may develop when young people need additional help dealing with emotional aftereffects the disaster or act of violence or with the disruption of the family's relocation. Young people may benefit from help from a health care professional if the emotional stress does not get better in a few weeks, or when they do any of the following:

- Display continual and aggressive emotional outbursts.
- Show serious problems at school (e.g. fighting, skipping school, arguments with teachers or food fights).
- Withdraw completely from family and friends.

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- Cannot cope with routine problems or daily activities.
- Engage in vandalism or juvenile, law-breaking activities.
- Express suicidal ideas.

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness. People have limits, and sometimes need help when stretched beyond their limits. Seeking help from others can offer solutions that may not be known to you.

Morgan, H. (2022, 24 February). *Helping young people cope with the stress of emergency or forced relocation* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). London: Workplace Options.

Adapted from: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). (Revised 2022 [Ed.]). *Relocation stress: Helping families deal with the stress of relocation after a disaster* (B. Schuette, Ed.) [Global Edit]. Retrieved 18 February 2022 from <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov>

Guidance for Refugee Hosts

Refugees and asylum seekers often need a temporary place to stay for the first weeks or months after they arrive in a new country. Providing a place of safety and comfort in your home, as a host, is a way of offering meaningful support to another person or family at a time of great need. That can be a wonderful and rewarding experience. It's also a commitment that requires preparation, patience and kindness. Because your guests have left their homes behind them, often in traumatic circumstances, they need to be welcomed with warmth and respect and supported as they find their way in their new country.

Deciding to Be a Host

Before committing to welcome guests who are refugees or asylum seekers into your home, learn what will be expected of you, and consider whether you are comfortable with those expectations. If you don't live alone, discuss these expectations with other members of your household, too. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do your partner and other members of your household also want to serve as hosts?
- Are you comfortable sharing your home with people from a different culture, who may have different religious beliefs?
- Do you have a room that can be set aside for your guests' private use?
- Will you be comfortable sharing your kitchen and bathroom with your guests?
- Will you be comfortable providing a key to your guests and trusting your home to them when you are not there?
- Do you have the time to help your guests learn to navigate your country's social support systems and access doctors, dentists, schools, language classes and other services?
- How long are you willing to be a host? (Some programmes require a six-month commitment.)

If you and all the members of your household are in agreement, that's great. Your first step is to apply to be a host through an agency or organisation that supports refugee resettlement.

Before Your Guests Arrive

Prepare your home to be a safe and welcoming place.

- **Choose and prepare a private space for your guests**, one where they will feel comfortable and safe:
 - Choose a room with a comfortable bed and a door that closes, preferably a room that gets natural light.
 - If your guests will include young children, make sure the room and the rest of the house are as childproof as possible, with no hazards a child might get to.
 - If your guests will include older people or people with mobility issues, choose a room on the ground floor with easy access to a toilet and washroom.
 - Move everything you are likely to need out of the guests' room, so you won't need to enter it after they arrive.
 - Prepare the room by cleaning it and providing clean towels and a spare blanket. Wash the linens before making the bed, preferably in hypoallergenic detergent.
 - Put curtains over the windows, if possible, for privacy.
 - Put out spare toiletries, and perhaps some snack food, such as chocolate or fruit. Some hosts prepare a box of basic necessities to leave in the room so guests don't have to ask for them.
- **Provide storage space.** Make space in your home where your guests can store luggage and extra belongings, in a place where they will have unrestricted access and their belongings will be secure.
- **Make space for guests to store and prepare food.** Clear space in the refrigerator and cupboards for your guests to store food. Plan to give them time and kitchen space to prepare their own meals.
- **Make spare keys** for your guests so that they will be free to come and go.

Think about house rules.

Consider your household's routine: when you get up, have meals, leave for work or school, come home and settle into quiet for sleep. Think about any rules that you should explain to your guests so that you can live comfortably together. These might include no smoking indoors or no loud noises between certain hours. Think about how you'll share the kitchen and washroom. Think about how you might accommodate guests who have different routines, going out or coming home after you are asleep, for example.

Prepare a 'welcome pack' with key information.

Write down key pieces of information in clear, simple language, and collect the pages of this welcome pack in a folder or binder. Start with the important information about you and your home: your name, the home's full address, Wi-Fi password, your phone number and numbers to call in an emergency. Explain how the television works and anything else that isn't obvious, like the temperature control in the shower. Include local bus or train routes (with maps if you have them) and how to buy tickets. Note addresses, phone numbers and websites for help centres, the post office, libraries and local organisations working to support refugees. If you can find it, add information about specialty food shops that carry groceries or serve meals in the cuisine of your guests' country and culture. Use simple explanations, pictures and symbols to make the information as clear as possible to a guest who isn't fluent in your language.

Consider how you'll deal with language differences.

Some guests may not speak your language. If you don't speak theirs (and you are not expected to, as a host), you'll want to be prepared with other ways to communicate across languages:

- Download a voice and text-to-speech translation app, like Google Translate, Dialog or SayHi Translate. Your guests will likely have one of these apps on their phones already.

- Learn a few key words and phrases in your guests' language, perhaps a couple of words of welcome and the words for *please* and *thank you*. Duolingo is a free programme and app that can get you started in learning a language.
- Find out if the agency or organisation that is making the hosting arrangement will be providing your guests with any translation services, and how they can access that support.

When Your Guests Arrive

Provide a warm welcome.

Understand that your guests may be tired and anxious when they arrive. They may have had a difficult journey to get to where they are, and they don't know you or whether to trust you. Your role is to make them feel welcome and safe, in the first moments of their visit and throughout their stay:

- Greet your guests with smiles and words of welcome.
- Show them their room so they can put their luggage down. Give them basic information about your home, such as where the toilet and washroom are and where they can store belongings they don't need to keep in their room. Show them the welcome pack and point out the Wi-fi password. Give them the key to your home, and explain that they are free to come and go as they wish.
- Give them a chance to wash up and rest, if they choose. Some guests will have lots of questions right away, while others may need to relax in privacy or sleep before they are ready to engage with you.
- Offer them tea or coffee and something to eat, but don't pressure them to sit down with you right away. Don't be offended if they don't want to eat or drink what you offer. They may be too anxious to eat, and the food may not be familiar to them.
- When you have a chance to sit with them, give them a simple version of your household routine, so they know they can join you for meals, if they choose, and when you'd like the house to be quiet for sleep. More detailed information can come when they've had a chance to rest and settle in.

Living Together

Help your guests feel comfortable and safe.

Once your guests have settled in and rested – this may take a few days – start having more involved conversations and figuring out how to make your life together comfortable:

- **Food** –
 - Expect to provide meals and snacks for the first few days, at least until your guests have learnt their way around the neighbourhood and found places to shop, but be open to it if your guests would prefer to buy and prepare their own food from the start. You might help your guests find and shop for the ingredients needed to prepare the food they prefer.
 - As your guests settle in, find comfortable ways to eat together or separately. You might each prepare your own food and eat at the same time, or you might eat at different times. You might take turns preparing food for each other, which can be a great way to learn about the food and food-related customs in each other's culture. Many guests appreciate the opportunity to prepare food for their hosts.
- **Independence** – You've given your guests the key to your home. Let them know they can live their lives in your home as independently of you as they choose, as long as you respect each other's needs for privacy, rest and the most important aspects of your routines. Help and support your guests in appropriate ways as they take steps to live independently in your country. For example, you might offer to babysit the young

children of your guests so they can get some rest or have more time to search for work and permanent housing.

- **Privacy and respect** – Different people have different expectations and levels of comfort around spending time together or alone and about asking personal questions. Some of this is cultural and some of it is based on personality. Negotiate, through respectful conversation and perhaps through some well-meant trial and error, the boundaries that are comfortable for you, your guests and the other members of your household.
- **Bridging language differences** – Even when you don't speak each other's languages, you'll likely be surprised at how much communication is possible. Draw pictures. Use gestures. Act out what you are trying to say. Use a translation app on your phone. Help your guest learn your language, if that's helpful to them, and encourage them to practise their language skills with you. Try learning their language.
- **Emotional healing** – Your guests may have experienced trauma before leaving their home or on their journey. They may be experiencing trauma during their stay with you as they get news of people they have left behind. Don't pry into those experiences. If your guests choose to share, listen. Be empathetic and supportive when they describe difficult experiences and painful emotions. Be honest with you guests if the stories they are sharing are too painful for you to hear. If it seems appropriate, offer to help them find a professional trauma counsellor who speaks their language and understands their culture.

Be helpful.

Your guests should have support and assistance from an agency or organisation that helps refugees and asylum seekers settle in your country. Find out where that support and guidance will be coming from when you apply to be a host. The organisation that pairs your guest with you should know.

While your role is not to serve as that official support service, your guests will appreciate your guidance as they learn to use public transportation, find places to shop and navigate life in your community. They may value and benefit from your help in explaining and guiding them to access points for local medical, education, housing and other community support systems. You might help them find free or low-cost language classes.

As you get to know your guests, ask about their experiences in your country: what they find hard to do or difficult to understand. Use your knowledge as a resident to help them learn about and adapt to life in your community. Offer suggestions that might make their lives easier. That can be anything from tips on cold-weather clothing to the best places to buy fresh fruits and vegetables.

Dos and Don'ts

- Do make it clear that you're offering more than just a place to stay, that you're willing and able to help your guests learn how to navigate life in their new community.
- Do offer your support without waiting to be asked. Some guests are reluctant to ask for help when they need it.
- Don't ask about the experiences that led your guests to leave their homes, or about their journey. Describing these may bring back feelings of trauma. Listen if they choose to share, but don't pry.
- Don't expect your guests to express their gratitude to you. They are dealing with a huge change in their lives and don't need the burden or discomfort of feeling indebted to you.
- Don't expect your guests to perform services for you in return for their room or to pay you money as rent. They are your guests, and this is not a business arrangement.

Morgan, H. (2023, 22 February). *Guidance for refugee hosts* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). London: Workplace Options (WPO).

Your Family Emergency Communication Plan

Communication networks, such as mobile phones and computers, could be unreliable during crises, and electricity could be disrupted. Ensure that all the members of your household – including children, people with disabilities or access and functional needs, and outside carers – know how to reach each other and where to meet up in an emergency.

Text is best! If you are using a mobile phone, a text message may get through when a phone call will not. This is because a text message requires far less bandwidth than a phone call. Text messages may also save and then send automatically as soon as capacity becomes available.

School, Childcare, Carer and Workplace Emergency Plans

Know each location's emergency-response plans and how to stay informed. Discuss these plans with children, and let them know who could pick them up in an emergency. Make sure your household members with phones are signed up for alerts and warnings from their school, workplace or local government. For children without mobile phones, make sure they know to follow instructions from a responsible adult, such as a teacher or school headmaster.

Out-of-Town Contact

Identify someone outside of your community, town or country who can act as a central point of contact to help your household reconnect. In a disaster, it may be easier to make a long-distance phone call than to call across town, because local phone lines can be jammed.

Emergency Meeting Places

Decide on safe, familiar places where your family can go for protection or to reunite. Make sure these locations are accessible for household members with disabilities or access and functional needs. If you have pets or service animals, think about animal-friendly locations. Identify the following places:

- **Indoor** – If you cannot leave your immediate area for whatever reason, make sure everyone knows where to go for protection. This could be a small, interior, windowless room or a safe shelter.
- **In your neighbourhood** – Is there a place in your neighbourhood where your household members can meet if there is an emergency and you need to leave your home?
- **Outside of your neighbourhood** – Is there a place where your family can meet if a disaster happens when you're not at home and you can't get back to your home? This could be a library, community centre, house of worship or family friend's home.
- **Outside of your town or city** – Having an out-of-town meeting place can help you reunite if a disaster happens and you cannot get home or to your out-of-neighbourhood meeting place, or your family is not together and your community is instructed to evacuate the area. This meeting place could be the home of a relative or family friend. Make sure everyone knows the address of the meeting place, and discuss ways you would get there.

Other Important Numbers and Information

You should also write down phone numbers for emergency services, utilities, service providers, medical providers, veterinarians, insurance companies and other services.

Important Tips for Communicating in Disasters

- Make copies of your family emergency communication plan for each member of the household to carry in their handbag, backpack, purse or wallet. Enter household and emergency contact information into all household members' mobile phones or devices. Make sure all household members and your out-of-town contact know how to text if they have a mobile phone or device, or know alternative ways to communicate.
- Text is best when using a mobile phone. If you make a phone call, keep it brief, and convey only vital information to emergency personnel and family or household members. This will minimise network congestion, free up space on the network for emergency communications and conserve battery power. Wait 10 seconds before redialling a number. If you redial too quickly, the data from the handset to the mobile sites do not have enough time to clear before you've re-sent the same data. This contributes to a clogged network.
- Conserve your mobile phone battery by reducing the brightness of your screen, placing your phone in airplane mode and closing apps you do not need. Limit watching videos and playing video games to help reduce network congestion.
- Keep charged batteries, a car phone charger and a solar charger available for backup power for your mobile phone, teletypewriters (TTYs), amplified phones and caption phones. If you charge your phone in your car, be sure the car is in a well-ventilated area (e.g. not in a closed garage) to avoid life-threatening carbon monoxide poisoning.
- If driving, do not write or read texts or make a call without a hands-free device.
- Consider maintaining a household landline and analogue phone (with battery backup if it has a cordless receiver) that can be used when mobile phone service is unavailable. Those who are deaf or hard of hearing, or who have speech disabilities and use devices and services that depend on digital technology (e.g. video relay service [VRS], internet protocol [IP] relay or captioning) should have an analogue phone (e.g. TTY, amplified phone or caption phone) with battery backup in case internet or mobile service is down.
- If you have a landline with a call-forwarding feature and you need to evacuate, forward your home phone number to your mobile phone number. Use the internet to communicate by email, Twitter, Facebook and other social media networks. These communication channels allow you to share information quickly with a wide audience or to find out if loved ones are OK. The internet can also be used for telephone calls through voice-over internet protocol (VOIP). For those who are deaf or hard of hearing, or who have speech disabilities, you can make calls through your IP-relay provider. If you do not have a mobile phone, keep a prepaid phone to use if needed during or after a disaster.
- If you live in an area with operational pay phones, use these if available. The circuits may have less congestion because these phones don't rely on electricity or mobile networks. In some public places, you may be able to find a TTY that can be used by those with hearing or speech disabilities.

U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Ready.gov. (2018, July). *Create your family emergency communication plan* [Pub. No. FEMA P-1094, pp. 3–5] (B. Schuette, Ed.). Retrieved 9 October 2023 from <https://www.ready.gov>

Build a Disaster Supplies Kit

After an emergency, you may need to survive on your own for several days. Being prepared means having your own food, water and other supplies to last for 72 hours. A *disaster supplies kit* is a collection of basic items your household may need in the event of an emergency.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

Make sure your emergency kit is stocked with the items on the checklist below. Most of the items are inexpensive and easy to find, and any one of them could save your life. Once you take a look at the basic items, consider what unique needs your family might have, such as supplies for pets or seniors.

Basic Disaster Supplies Kit

To assemble your kit, store items in airtight plastic bags, and put your entire disaster supplies kit in one or two easy-to-carry containers, such as plastic bins or a duffel bag. A basic emergency supply kit could include the following recommended items:

- Water – four litres of water per person per day for at least three days, for drinking and sanitation
- Food – at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio
- Torch
- First aid kit
- Extra batteries
- Whistle to signal for help
- Dust mask to help filter contaminated air
- Plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter in place
- Moist towelettes, rubbish bags and plastic ties for personal sanitation
- Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- Manual tin opener for food
- Local maps
- Mobile phone with chargers and a backup battery

Additional Emergency Supplies

Since the start of the pandemic, most public health authorities recommend that people include additional items in their kits to help prevent the spread of coronavirus, the flu and other viruses. Consider adding the following items to your emergency supply kit based on your individual needs:

- Masks (for everyone ages two and above), soap, hand sanitiser and disinfecting wipes to disinfect surfaces
- Prescription medications
- Non-prescription medications, such as pain relievers, antidiarrhea medication, antacids or laxatives
- Prescription eyeglasses and contact lens solution
- Infant formula, bottles, nappies, wipes and nappy-rash cream
- Pet food and extra water for your pet
- Cash or traveller's cheques
- Important family documents, such as copies of insurance policies, identification and bank account records, saved electronically or in a waterproof, portable container
- Sleeping bag or warm blanket for each person
- Sturdy shoes and complete change of clothing appropriate for your climate
- Fire extinguisher
- Matches in a waterproof container
- Feminine supplies and personal hygiene items
- Mess kits, paper cups, plates, paper towels and plastic utensils
- Paper and pencil
- Books, games, puzzles or other activities for children

Maintaining Your Kit

After assembling your kit, remember to maintain it so it's ready when needed:

- Keep tinned food in a cool, dry place.
- Store boxed food in tightly-closed plastic or metal containers.
- Replace expired items as needed.
- Rethink your needs every year, and update your kit as your family's needs change.

Kit Storage Locations

Since you do not know where you will be when an emergency occurs, prepare supplies for home, work and vehicles:

- **Home** – Keep this kit in a designated place, and have it ready in case you have to leave your home quickly. Make sure all family members know where the kit is kept.
- **Work** – Be prepared to shelter at work for at least 24 hours. Your work kit should include food, water and other necessities like medicines, as well as comfortable walking shoes, stored in a 'grab and go' case.
- **Vehicle** – In case you are stranded, keep a kit of emergency supplies in your car.

U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Ready.gov. (Revised 2021, 16 November). *Build a kit* (Global Edit, B. Schuette, Ed.). Retrieved 25 January 2022 from <https://www.ready.gov>

Addressing Employees' Needs in a Crisis

When a traumatic event occurs in the workplace, employees and often the entire organisation are impacted. This is a special time that requires special management. Through their immediate and supportive actions, managers can significantly contribute to the recovery of individuals directly and indirectly impacted. Here are some examples of steps managers can take in a crisis.

Safety

- Follow all emergency response procedures to ensure the physical safety of employees, customers or other visitors in the workplace.
- Contact emergency services for appropriate local law enforcement, military or fire department personnel.
- Depending upon the nature of the event, help the employees secure or evacuate the building, move to a designated shelter or follow lockdown procedures.
- Take a count of everyone assembled, and determine if anyone is missing. Inform emergency response personnel of any missing employees.
- Communicate in a calm, controlled manner. Reassure employees that they are safe.
- When available, communicate accurate and verified information to emergency response personnel, your manager, employees and others with a need-to-know position.

Triage

- Identify those employees most at risk physically. Give necessary emergency first aid and emotional support. If possible, ask about any history of exhibited physical problems. Provide information to emergency

response personnel when they arrive. Enlist other employees to stay with their colleagues at the workplace and, if feasible, at the hospital.

- Contact family members of hurt employees and, in a caring manner, inform them of the event. Offer transportation to the hospital, if needed.

Assessment and Follow-Through

- Identify employees who were directly or indirectly involved, for example, any who were minimally hurt during the event, witnesses or first responders. Talk to them to judge how they were affected. You will likely observe a wide range of reactions: from none to extreme agitation. Explain that everyone's reactions are normal responses to an abnormal event. Calmly give them encouragement and support. If necessary, find a colleague to act as a buddy to someone who continues to cry or remains agitated. Consult with your manager, employee assistance programme (EAP) or other professional resource if you become concerned about an employee's extreme state of mind.
- Communicate with supervisors and team leaders to assist in identifying needs and providing support. Possible acute needs include water and food, a change of clothing, phones to contact loved ones and transportation home.
- Arrange transportation for anyone needing non-acute medical care.

Advocacy

- If needed, request additional support from senior management. You may need coverage from other areas or departments to balance out the disruption in your work team. Let senior management know that normal work productivity will be reduced for a period of time after the event.
- Be flexible in work schedules; for example, extend time to complete projects, and if a funeral or memorial service is held during the workday, encourage employees to attend.
- Consult with the EAP about available services and on-site support. Inform employees if any arrangements are made.
- Foster opportunities for colleagues to support one another.

Communication

- Notify the next of kin in cases of fatal accidental, suicidal or homicidal death.
- Share information as soon as it becomes available. Don't be afraid to say, 'I don't know'. Follow up when you find the answers to those questions.
- Always communicate in a caring and understanding manner. Talking about an incident is one of the ways people recover from a traumatic event. Model that behaviour by sharing your feelings and experience of the incident. However, make sure you have first talked through your experience with someone else. You will want to convey your personal side without losing your composure.
- Help employees feel supported by your presence. Be visible, ask them how they are doing and be a good listener. Don't judge their experience or give them advice about how they should be reacting. If you do, they will shut down and not be forthcoming in the future. Tell them you are extending an open-door policy to them as a result of this crisis. Make sure you can follow through with that promise.
- If you find that your time is limited and you're unable to stay on top of the communication process, appoint an information coordinator. That person can gather pertinent information from law enforcement, family members or other sources; send updates; work with you to share major announcements at meetings and so forth.

Return to Work

- Returning to normal work schedules and routines promotes a sense of normalcy and recovery from the traumatic experience. Help employees remain at work or return to work as soon as they can. Accommodate employee needs or consider temporary adjustments.
- Provide information on the EAP or other sources of support. Explain why these resources can be helpful at times like these.
- Keep in contact with employees who are off work due to the incident. Help them with the transition back to work when they return.

Source

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. (n.d.). *Psychological first aid: How you can support well-being in disaster victims*. Retrieved 18 February 2022 from <https://www.cstsonline.org>

Sulaski, C. & Schuette, B. (Ed.). (Revised 2022). *Addressing employees' needs in a crisis*. London: Workplace Options.

Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions

Recovery after a traumatic event is a process that takes time. If you take direct action to cope with your stress reactions, it may create a sense of power. Learn how you can use *active coping* after trauma and for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.

Active Coping

Active coping means accepting the impact of trauma on your life and taking direct action to improve things. Active coping occurs even when there is no crisis. Active coping is a way of responding to everyday life. It is a habit that must be made stronger.

Know that recovery is a process.

Following exposure to a trauma, most people experience stress reactions. Understand that recovering from the trauma is a process and takes time. Knowing this will help you feel more in control:

- Having an ongoing response to the trauma is normal.
- Recovery is an ongoing, daily process. It happens little by little. It is not a matter of being cured all of a sudden.
- Healing doesn't mean forgetting traumatic events. It doesn't mean you will have no pain or bad feelings when thinking about them.
- Healing may mean fewer symptoms and symptoms that bother you less.
- Healing means more confidence that you will be able to cope with your memories and symptoms. You will be better able to manage your feelings.

Positive Coping Actions

Certain actions can help to reduce your distressing symptoms and make things better. Plus, these actions can result in changes that last into the future. Here are some positive coping methods.

Learn about trauma and PTSD.

It is useful for trauma survivors to learn more about common reactions to trauma and about PTSD. Find out what is normal. Find out what the signs are that you may need assistance from others. When you learn that the symptoms of PTSD are common, you realise that you are not alone, weak or crazy. It helps to know your problems are shared by hundreds of thousands of others. When you seek treatment and begin to understand your response to trauma, you will be better able to cope with the symptoms of PTSD.

Talk to others for support.

When survivors talk about their problems with others, something helpful often results. It is important not to isolate yourself. Instead make efforts to be with others. Of course, you must choose your support people with care. You must also ask them clearly for what you need. With support from others, you may feel less alone and more understood. You may also get concrete help with a problem you have.

Practise relaxation methods.

Try some different ways to relax, including

- Muscle relaxation exercises
- Breathing exercises
- Meditation
- Swimming, stretching, yoga
- Prayer
- Listening to quiet music
- Spending time in nature

While relaxation techniques can be helpful, in a few people they can sometimes increase distress at first. This can happen when you focus attention on disturbing physical sensations and you reduce contact with the outside world. Most often, continuing with relaxation in small amounts that you can handle will help reduce negative reactions. You may want to try mixing relaxation in with music, walking or other activities.

Distract yourself with positive activities.

Pleasant recreational or work activities help distract a person from his or her memories and reactions. For example, art has been a way for many trauma survivors to express their feelings in a positive, creative way. Pleasant activities can improve your mood, limit the harm caused by PTSD and help you rebuild your life.

Talk to your doctor or a counsellor about trauma and PTSD.

Part of taking care of yourself means using the helping resources around you. If efforts at coping don't seem to work, you may become fearful or depressed. If your PTSD symptoms don't begin to go away or get worse over time, it is important to reach out and call a counsellor who can help turn things around. Your family doctor can also refer you to a specialist who can treat PTSD. Talk to your doctor about your trauma and your PTSD symptoms. That way, he or she can take care of your health better.

Many with PTSD have found treatment with medicines to be helpful for some symptoms. By taking medicines, some survivors of trauma are able to improve their sleep, anxiety, irritability and anger. It can also reduce urges to drink or use drugs.

Coping with the Symptoms of PTSD

Here are some direct ways to cope with the following specific PTSD symptoms.

Unwanted Distressing Memories, Images or Thoughts

- Remind yourself that they are just that: memories.
- Remind yourself that it's natural to have some memories of the trauma(s).
- Talk about them to someone you trust.
- Remember that, although reminders of trauma can feel overwhelming, they often lessen with time.

Sudden Feelings of Anxiety or Panic

Traumatic stress reactions often include feeling your heart pounding and feeling lightheaded or spacey. This is usually caused by rapid breathing. If this happens, remember the following:

- These reactions are not dangerous. If you had them while exercising, they most likely would not worry you.
- These feelings often come with scary thoughts that are not true. For example, you may think, 'I'm going to die', 'I'm having a heart attack' or 'I will lose control'. It is the scary thoughts that make these reactions so upsetting.
- Slowing down your breathing may help.
- The sensations will pass soon, and then you can go on with what you were doing.

Each time you respond in these positive ways to your anxiety or panic, you will be working toward making it happen less often. Practice will make it easier to cope.

Feeling Like the Trauma Is Happening Again (Flashbacks)

- Keep your eyes open. Look around you, and notice where you are.
- Talk to yourself. Remind yourself where you are, what year you're in and that you are safe. The trauma happened in the past, and you are in the present.
- Get up and move around. Have a drink of water, and wash your hands.
- Call someone you trust, and tell them what is happening.
- Remind yourself that this is a common response after trauma.
- Tell your counsellor or doctor about the flashback(s).

Dreams and Nightmares Related to the Trauma

- If you wake up from a nightmare in a panic, remind yourself that you are reacting to a dream. Having the dream is why you are in a panic, not because there is real danger now.
- You may want to get up out of bed, regroup and orient yourself to the here and now.
- Engage in a pleasant, calming activity. For example, listen to some soothing music.
- Talk to someone if possible.
- Talk to your doctor about your nightmares. Certain medicines can be helpful.

Difficulty Falling or Staying Asleep

- Keep to a regular bedtime schedule.
- Avoid heavy exercise for the few hours just before going to bed.
- Avoid using your sleeping area for anything other than sleeping or sex.
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. These harm your ability to sleep.

- Do not lie in bed thinking or worrying. Get up and enjoy something soothing or pleasant. Read a calming book, drink a glass of warm milk or herbal tea, or do a quiet hobby.

Irritability, Anger, and Rage

- Take a time out to cool off or think things over. Walk away from the situation.
- Get in the habit of exercise daily. Exercise reduces body tension and relieves stress.
- Remember that staying angry doesn't work. It actually increases your stress and can cause health problems.
- Talk to your counsellor or doctor about your anger. Take classes in how to manage anger.
- If you blow up at family members or friends, find time as soon as you can to talk to them about it. Let them know how you feel and what you are doing to cope with your reactions.

Difficulty Concentrating or Staying Focused

- Slow down. Give yourself time to focus on what it is you need to learn or do.
- Write things down. Making to-do lists may be helpful.
- Break tasks down into small, doable chunks.
- Plan a realistic number of events or tasks for each day.
- You may be depressed. Many people who are depressed have trouble concentrating. Again, this is something you can discuss with your counsellor, doctor or someone close to you.

Trouble Feeling or Expressing Positive Emotions

- Remember that this is a common reaction to trauma. You are not doing this on purpose. You should not feel guilty for something you do not want to happen and cannot control.
- Make sure to keep taking part in activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy. Even if you don't think you will enjoy something, once you get into it, you may well start having feelings of pleasure.
- Take steps to let your loved ones know that you care. You can express your caring in little ways: write a card, leave a small gift, or phone someone and say hello.

A Final Word

Try using all these ways of coping to find which ones are helpful to you. Then practise them. Like other skills, they work better with practice. Be aware that there are also behaviours that don't help you cope – such as substance abuse, isolating yourself or avoidance.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. (Updated 2022, 23 March). *Coping with traumatic stress reactions*. Retrieved 13 May 2022 from <https://www.ptsd.va.gov>