

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.

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