



Coping with an Insecure Environment

Living and working in an environment of on-going insecurity is particularly stressful for employees and their families. Experience shows that employees of relief and development organizations experience some very common reactions to insecurity or other forms of work-related stress. This page discusses some of those reactions and provides suggestions about how we can take care of ourselves, our children, and our colleagues during periods of on-going insecurity and heightened stress.

Common Reactions

Living in an insecure environment affects our body, emotions, mind, behavior, relationships and spirit. Some of the most common early responses that people have during a time of heightened insecurity include rapid heartbeat, feeling anxious or scared a lot of the time, looking for danger or threats all around you, and being eager for more information about the current situation. While these reactions may be disturbing, these are reactions that actually help to keep you safe when faced with danger. They prepare your body to take action to protect yourself and your family. If you are in danger we encourage you to take action to ensure your safety. However, when living in an environment of ongoing insecurity, we may have these reactions even when not facing an immediate threat. Have you noticed any of these reactions in the recent days or weeks?

When insecurity continues for a long period of time, you may notice some other reactions.

- **Physical changes**—rapid heartbeat and breathing, muscle tension, headaches
- **Emotional changes**—anxiety, anger, very intense emotions (both positive and negative feelings), not feeling anything at all
- **Changes in thinking**—nightmares or difficulty sleeping, trouble concentrating, poor problem-solving, always looking out for danger even when in a safe place
- **Changes in behavior**—increased alcohol or tobacco use, eating too much or too little, no longer enjoying activities that used to be pleasurable
- **Changes in relationships**—withdrawing from family and friends, arguing with co-workers, marital trouble, domestic violence
- **Spiritual changes**— finding it difficult to keep up with the religious and spiritual practices such as prayers

How Can We Take Care of Ourselves?

Although these changes are very common in response to insecurity, they should be a signal that we need to take care of ourselves. If we do not take steps to take care of ourselves then our decision making, behavior and relationships may become controlled by fear and anxiety rather than rational, healthy information. It is virtually impossible for employees to escape stress, especially in a high threat environment. Therefore, our task is to **manage stress**, since we may not be able to eliminate it.

What can we do to cope with the insecurity and manage the stress of our living and working environment?

- Rigorously follow security protocols and practices. Practicing good personal security is the first rule of coping in an insecure environment.
- Seek accurate, reliable information about the security situation. Regular security or situation briefings at the office are a good way to do this.
- Resist listening to and passing on every rumor. In insecure environments rumors may be widespread because people are seeking information and will create a story if they do not have information. But rumors feed our anxiety. Check rumors with trusted sources, such as your Country Office.
- Beyond what you need to watch for your personal safety and to do your job, limit your TV and internet news watching. Although it is good to limit all kinds of news coverage during times of insecurity, it is especially important to limit your TV and internet coverage because the pictures and images activate fear and anxiety rather than sound judgment.
- If it is safe to do so, try to get some moderate exercise most days of the week and try to get enough sleep. This helps our body eliminate the chemicals that are produced when we are stressed and anxious.
- Sit quietly for five minutes in the morning and evening and breathe deeply and slowly. This helps our body relax and reduces the physical excitement that occurs when we are feeling stressed or anxious.
- Avoid working long hours without a break. Take brief breaks during the day and discuss among your team how to accomplish your goals within a reasonable work day.
- Do something that you find refreshing, for example, watching a movie, reading a book, listening to music, practicing a hobby. We all need a break from the concerns and demands we face. Even taking a 10-15 minute break to do something enjoyable can be helpful.
- Identify one or two people with whom you can share your fears, difficulties and challenges and resolve to positively support each other. Focus on problem solving rather than letting emotions control you.

How Can We Take Care of Our Children?

Employees with children may also be concerned about how to help their children in the midst of insecurity. Here are some suggestions that parents from all over the world have found helpful.

- Let your child know it is normal to feel upset when something bad or scary happens
- As much as possible, reinforce ideas of safety and security
- Encourage the child to express feelings and thoughts, without making judgments
- Return to normal routines as much as possible
- Whenever possible, help restore a sense of control and choice by offering your child reasonable options about daily activities (e.g., “Would you like to wear the blue pants or the black pants today?” “Would you like to read a book or draw a picture right now?”)
- Some children may start to do things he or she did when younger (e.g., sucking a thumb or wetting the bed at night). If this happens, adults can help by being supportive, remembering that it is a common response to difficult events, and not criticizing the behavior. For most children, this behavior will disappear on its own as children feel safe and secure.

How Can We Take Care of Each Other?

There are also ways that we can help and support each other at work during this period of insecurity.

- Managers and supervisors should rigorously follow and enforce safety and security protocols and practices. It is important to model good behavior and provide reminders and refresher training if necessary.
- Information is a key human need in times of uncertainty. Managers and supervisors should work to provide timely, accurate, and consistent information. Repeat messages frequently.
- Provide outlets for questions and expressions of fear, concern and anxiety.
- Managers and supervisors should look for opportunities to reinforce employees' efforts to take good care of themselves.
- Take time to connect with co-workers, even if only briefly. Check in with each other and actively listen to each other.
- Remember that many staff may be feeling anxious, concerned or stressed. Make an extra effort to be patient with each other.
- Try to maintain a sense of humor even in the midst of insecurity.
- Recognize and acknowledge the work and efforts of colleagues.

Stress and insecurity, unfortunately, are occupational hazards in the humanitarian profession. Acknowledging that we are all vulnerable to stress is a way for us to support employees. In our teams or with our colleagues, here are some questions to discuss together:

- What are the most significant sources of stress for us as individuals at this point in time? What about as a team?
- What are some of the signs of stress that we see in ourselves and our team?
- What are the positive ways that we are coping as individuals in the current insecure environment? As a team?
- What additional ways we could use as individuals and as a team to cope in a healthy way?