

Managing Stress During Mandatory Evacuation

About this resource

Whether it is due to conflict or a natural disaster, being evacuated is unavoidably stressful. This resource shares common reactions in these types of situations and gives you tips on things you can do to help manage the stress before, during, and after an evacuation.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is suitable for staff who may be instructed to evacuate the city/country due to armed conflict or natural disaster. It is particularly relevant to staff working abroad.

For staff who are likely to be (or already have been) internally displaced within their home country, the *Maintaining Wellbeing During Displacement Resource* should also be provided.

What's in this resource?

This resource shares common reactions you may experience if you need to evacuate and tips on things you can do to help manage the stress before, during, and after an evacuation.

- BEFORE AN EVACUATION 2**
 - Common reactions before an evacuation 2
 - What helps? 2
- DURING AN EVACUATION 4**
 - Common reactions during an evacuation 4
 - What helps? 4
- AFTER AN EVACUATION 5**
 - Common reactions once you are safe after an evacuation 5
 - What helps? 5
- SUMMARY 6**

Before an evacuation

In many cases the decision to evacuate some staff and/or instruct staff to shelter in place will occur after a period of escalating tension, threats, or increased risks.

Logistically this is good, as it allows everyone to prepare as best, they can. Psychologically, however, this can be difficult. This “waiting period”—when everyone is watching and wondering what might come next—takes a toll.

Common reactions before an evacuation

When we sense threat, our body responds in ways that prepare us to meet the challenge and protect ourselves. Hormones and other chemicals are released when we sense danger, and they trigger what we often refer to as “stress reactions.” These reactions usually don’t feel very good to experience, but they are totally normal. They are, in fact, our body’s way of trying to help us survive.

Here are some things people commonly experience during the period of rising uncertainty before an evacuation:

- **A general sense of high energy or being super-alert and in “overdrive” all the time.** This sense of heightened awareness can be followed or interspersed with “energy crashes”— sudden and extreme fatigue, feeling overwhelmed and/or helpless.
- **Difficulty sleeping well.**
- **Feeling distracted, jittery, and unable to focus on anything** very well, or for very long.
- **A sense of wanting something—anything—to happen just to break the tension.** This can sometimes lead people to make risky decisions.
- **Craving more of the unhealthy or dangerous things we can use to help ourselves cope** (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes, risky sex).
- **Feeling scared and sure that the worst is about to happen OR feeling disbelief that this is actually happening/feeling sure that it will all blow over and settle down.** It is not uncommon for people to seesaw between these two extremes.

What helps?

What can you do to help yourself cope with the stress during this “wait and watch” period?

In general, the more you feel safe and in-control, the better you will cope. That means that **one of the best things you can do is to prepare.**

Review your organization’s safety and security procedures, follow those guidelines, and prepare yourself on a personal level. For example, pack a bag with essential documents, backup flash drives, battery packs, essential medication, food, and water. Make sure to pack a book, a deck of cards, or some other form of entertainment. Make a list of things you would want to grab if you had to evacuate—laptops,

passports and money out of the safe, etc.—and place this list on top of your bag. Being well prepared will help you feel calmer and more in control.

What else?

- Remember you may be tempted to take risks, and intentionally be cautious.
- Remember that you will likely be distracted. This is not “business as usual” time, and you should not expect yourself to focus on work the way you normally can.
- Do not worry if you experience intense emotions and feel like you are veering from one extreme to another.
- Practice those disciplines that ground and calm you. If you meditate, pray, practice yoga, write, draw, read... continue to do these things if you can. This is a time to do *more* of those things, not less.
- Eat small meals or snacks often, rather than trying to eat larger meals.
- Periodically try to focus on and think about something else other than your current situation. Books, audiobooks, podcasts, and TV can help with this. Keep this entertainment on the lighter side—avoid war epics, thrillers, or crime dramas.
- Exercise if you possibly can, even if this means skipping rope and doing workouts in the office. One of the best ways to help your body cope with rising levels of stress chemicals is to use some of them up through vigorous activity.
- Connect with your community/family at home and update them regularly. Keeping family and friends informed allows you receive support and will help prevent you from being barraged with questions and concerns.

During an evacuation

When an evacuation is ordered the waiting is over and it is time to act.

Common reactions during an evacuation

Here are some things people commonly experience and feel during an evacuation:

- **Overwhelmed**, confused, paralyzed, and not sure what to do first/next.
- **Guilty and distressed** at leaving friends and colleagues behind.
- **Grief and a sense of loss** at the interruption to programs and the implications for the vulnerable people you have been working to help.
- **Angry and/or relieved** that the decision has been made to evacuate.
- **Scared** that something will go wrong at the last minute.
- **Numb** and as if you are just going through the motions.

Sometimes these reactions can feel as if they are in tension with one another. For example, you may feel relieved that you are being evacuated, then feel worried about the people you are leaving behind, and then feel guilty that you feel relieved.

What helps?

An evacuation is a high-stress exercise. Anything you can do during this process to help yourself stay calm and think more clearly will help. One of the most portable and effective strategies to accomplish this is deep breathing. When we take slow, deep breaths, it sends an effective “calm down” signal to our body and brain.

Three other strategies you can use to help you stay grounded even while you are “in transit” are:

- ***Deliberately pay attention to what you can sense in the present.*** Focus attention on what you can feel in different areas of your body, what you can hear, see, smell and taste. This is particularly good to do if you are feeling overwhelmed and panicky.
- ***Distract yourself from the present.*** There can be long hours of waiting and travel involved in an evacuation. Give yourself something else to think about by pulling out a book or listening to music or a podcast.
- ***Gratitude visualization:*** List 5 positive things in your life that bring joy and briefly visualize them.

After an evacuation

After an evacuation you might enter another period of uncertainty. For example, you may be physically safe, but 'camping out' in a hotel or guesthouse, unsure of where you will go and what you will do next.

If you are physically safe, you may experience a period of "let-down." You have been under elevated stress for some time, and when your body stops producing so many stress hormones and chemicals your energy levels and emotions are likely to dip.

Common reactions once you are safe after an evacuation

- **Feeling exhausted and overwhelmed OR feeling manic and like you have to jump into the next project/tackle the next to-do list immediately.** You may also veer between these two extremes.
- **Feeling unable to care about next steps** or much of anything else.
- **Feeling guilty and grateful** at the same time.
- **Feeling isolated**, and like no one who was not there understands what you have gone through.
- **Feeling like you do not want to think or talk about it at all, feeling like you cannot stop thinking about it and want to talk about it all the time, or veering between these two extremes.**
- **Finding it difficult to relax and sleep**
- **Feeling disconnected** from life where you are now, and as if everything happening around you is unreal.
- **Feeling conflicted about the evacuation**, especially if you did not agree with management on the decision to evacuate. You may feel like your values have been compromised (i.e. we value people but when it comes time for evacuation we treat some people differently than others) and feel like there is a gap between what the organization says it values and the decisions made by management.

What helps?

Immediately after an evacuation, be gentle with yourself. We live in a world where it is possible to get on a plane in the morning and disembark a day later on the other side of the globe. We often expect our thoughts and feelings to be able to travel just as fast, but they do not. We humans are remarkably resilient, but even if you are physically safe it will likely take longer than a day or two before you feel like you (and life) are anywhere back near normal.

Here are some things that can help after an evacuation:

- **Update your family and friends:** Let your family and friends know where you are, and that you are safe.
- **Take some time:** Give yourself a couple of days to just "be" without pressure or expectations of making immediate decisions.

- **Spend time with others:** If you have been evacuated to a safe location with colleagues, and are based there temporarily to consider next steps, do not sit in your room by yourself all day. Get out and spend some time with those colleagues. Play cards or board games together.
- **Get as much sleep as possible:** If you have trouble sleeping, rest quietly anyway.
- **Get some exercise and spend some time outside:** This will also help you sleep better.
- **Do not make any big decisions in the first few weeks after an evacuation.** For example, do not quit your job, end your most important relationship, or buy a house.
- **Talk to a good counselor.** If your organization provides counseling benefits, schedule an appointment. This will allow you to discuss your experiences and any concerns, consider your next steps, and make a plan for continuing self-care. It is particularly important to seek counseling if you experience any of the following:
 - You keep thinking about events connected with the evacuation, even when you are trying not to.
 - Everything around you feels unreal, and you feel like you have lost your identity and do not know who you are now.
 - You feel extremely anxious or have any panic attacks.
 - You feel very depressed, guilty, or hopeless.
 - You do not want to see or talk to anyone; you just want to be alone all the time.
 - You find yourself drinking and smoking a lot more or self-medicating in other ways.

Summary

Everyone who goes through an evacuation will react differently. While it is impossible to predict how any particular person may react, it is useful to know that a wide range of strong emotions and other reactions may occur during and after such an event.

In general, the more you perceive that your safety or life is at risk, the more likely you are to experience intense reactions. As the days and then weeks go by, you should start to experience fewer reactions and signs of stress. Many of the reactions that you experienced during and immediately after the event should have begun to subside a month after the event. If that is not the case, talk to a mental health professional about what you are experiencing.