

Coping With An Insecure Environment

About this resource

Living and working in an environment of on-going insecurity is particularly stressful. When you are living and working in an environment that feels insecure and uncertain, you are likely to experience some very common stress reactions. However, there are things you can do to support and protect your wellbeing during this time, as well as support those around you.

Who is this resource for?

Anyone living and working in an insecure or high-stress environment.

What’s in this resource?

In this resource we share some reactions people commonly experience to stress and insecurity, and provide suggestions for how you can take care of yourself, your children, and your colleagues during periods of on-going insecurity and heightened stress.

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Common Stress Reactions In An Insecure Environment

When you sense threat, your body responds in ways that prepare you to protect yourself. Hormones and other chemicals are released when you sense danger, and they trigger what we often refer to as “stress reactions.” These reactions affect your body, emotions, mind, behavior, and spirit.

Here are some things people commonly experience during the period of rising uncertainty and pressure

Some of the most common early responses that people have during a time of heightened insecurity include:

- Feeling distracted, jittery, and unable to focus on anything very well, or for very long.
- Rapid heartbeat
- Feeling anxious or scared a lot of the time
- Looking for danger or threats all around you
- Being eager for more information about the current situation

They reactions don't feel very comfortable to experience, but they are totally normal. They are, in fact, your body's way of trying to keep you safe. They prepare your body to take action to protect yourself and your family.

However, when living in an environment of ongoing insecurity, you may have these reactions even when you 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, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping
- **Emotional changes:** Anxiety, anger, very intense emotions (both positive and negative feelings), not feeling anything at all
- **Changes in thinking:** Difficulty concentrating, poor problem-solving, always looking out for danger even when in a safe place, recurrent thoughts of the current situation even when you're trying to focus on something else, nightmares
- **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:** Questioning your faith, or sense of meaning and purpose, doubts, changes in how you engage with religious and spiritual disciplines you typically practice

How Can You Take Care of Yourself?

These sorts of stress reactions and changes are a very common in response to insecurity. However, they should also serve as a signal that you need to intentionally take care of yourself during this time.

If you do not take steps to take care of yourself then your health and resilience will suffer, and your decision making, behavior, and relationships may become controlled by fear and anxiety. When it is not possible to reduce or escape stress, your task becomes to **manage it**.

What can you do to cope with insecurity and manage a stressful living and working environment?

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**.

- **Seek accurate, reliable information about the security situation and take sensible precautions.** If your organization provides security guidance, read all security briefings and follow your organization's security protocols. If not, seek accurate information and practice good personal security.
- **Prepare yourself on a personal level.** Being well prepared will help you feel calmer and more in control. For example:
 - Stock up on non-perishable food in case you need to shelter in place for an extended period.
 - Pack a bag with essential documents, cash, 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.
- **Resist listening to and passing on every rumor:** In insecure environments, misinformation and rumors may be widespread because people are seeking information and will create a story even if they do not have access to reliable information. But rumors feed our anxiety. Check rumors with trusted sources.
- **Don't worry if you experience intense emotions** and feel like you're veering from one extreme to another.
- **Beyond what you need to watch for your personal safety and to do your job, limit your TV and internet news watching.** It is especially important to limit your consumption of TV and internet coverage because the pictures, images, and stories of personal tragedy activate fear and anxiety rather than sound judgment.
- **If it is safe to do so, try to get some moderate exercise most days.** 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.
- **Get as much sleep as possible:** Try to prioritize getting sleep. Rest periodically, even if you can't sleep.
- **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. For example:
 - Sit quietly for five minutes in the morning and evening and breathe deeply and slowly. This helps your body relax and reduces the physical excitement that occurs when you are feeling stressed or anxious.
- **Avoid working long hours without a break.** Take brief breaks during the day. Limit working hours. Discuss among your team and colleagues how to accomplish key goals within a reasonable work day and how to set boundaries that help support wellbeing.

- **Periodically do something that you find refreshing or enjoyable:** For example, watching a movie, reading a book, listening to music, practicing a hobby. Even taking a 10-15 minute break to do something enjoyable can be helpful.
- **Give and receive support:** 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 You Take Care of Your Children?

If you have children, you may also be how to help and support them during this time.

When children feel insecure and scared, they may start to do thing they 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. Here are some other tips on helping children cope better during insecure and stressful times:

- **Normalize feeling scared and sad:** 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:** Reassure children as best you can that they are safe, that you are there to help and protect them, and that this situation is likely temporary.
- **Encourage the child to express feelings and thoughts:** Encourage them to share what they're thinking and feeling. Treat everything they say gently, without judgment or criticism.
- **Stick to (or create) regular routines for children as much as possible.** This will help structure the day and give everyone a sense of predictability and control which can be very helpful.
 - For example, try to maintain a consistent, calming bedtime routine for children.
 - Create or maintain school routines if possible. Organize makeshift classes and other learning or communal activities (such as games and sports) in the absence of established schools.
- **Give children plenty of affection.** Just like the adults, children are likely to be scared, unsettled, and sad. With children, stress often shows up in the way they behave rather than what they say.
 - Some children get very quiet. Some get angry and difficult. Some get clingy and want to be near you all the time.
 - Give children plenty of affection, smiles, and hugs. Touching your children with love, spending some time with them doing something they want to do (even for just 10 minutes a day), and sleeping close to them will help them feel safer and calmer.
- **Shield children** as much as possible from distressing news and information, as well as your own concerns.
 - Depending on how old they are, aim to give children enough accurate information to help them understand some of the bigger picture, but shield them when possible from distressing details.

- Young children often need reassurance more than facts, while older children may want to feel they can come to you for information about what’s really going on.
- **Help create a sense of control and choice for your children:** Whenever possible, help restore a sense of control and choice by offering your child reasonable options about daily activities
 - For example: “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?”

How Can You Take Care of Each Other?

There are also ways that you can help and support your colleagues and friends at work during this period:

- Take time to connect with co-workers, even if only briefly. Check in with each other and actively listen to each other.
- Make an extra effort to be patient. Everyone is likely experiencing heightened emotions and may be struggling to cope.
- Try to maintain a sense of humor even in the midst of insecurity.
- Encourage others. Recognize and acknowledge the work and efforts of colleagues.

Tips for Managers on Supporting Employees During Times of Insecurity

If employees feel very stressed but also feel that their managers and the organization as a whole genuinely care about them, that will make the stress easier to bear and the experience less stressful over time. As such, managers at all levels can support the wellbeing of staff they supervise during times of uncertainty by doing some or all of the following:

- **Make supporting the ongoing employment and wellbeing of staff during this time a very high priority.** Clearly communicate to staff that their physical and emotional safety is a top priority.
- **Reduce normal workload pressure as much as possible.** Recognize that staff will be more anxious and distracted than normal, and unlikely to be able to focus on work as well as they normally can.
- **Alleviate uncertainty about future employment as much as possible.**
- **Managers and supervisors should rigorously follow and enforce safety and security protocols and practices.** It is important to model good behavior. If your organization does not have security protocols in place, encourage your employees to take care of themselves and prioritize safety.
- **Update staff fully and regularly.** 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.
- **Be aware of and acknowledge that many staff will be experiencing strong emotions.** Make an extra effort to be patient. Acknowledge that we are all vulnerable to stress. Look for opportunities to reinforce employees’ efforts to take good care of themselves.

- **Provide outlets for questions and expressions of fear, concern and anxiety:** Here are some questions to discuss with teams or colleagues:
 - 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?