

Maintaining Wellbeing During Displacement

Taking care of yourself and others when you have to leave your home

About this resource

Having to leave your home because of conflict or natural disaster creates a lot of loss, stress, fear, and grief. It disrupts normal routines, schooling, and livelihoods. It often means losing property, food, livestock, jobs, and important community relationships. And it creates fear and uncertainty related to safety, food and shelter, and what may happen in the future.

Given this, it is important to answer this question: *What can you do to help yourself maintain wellbeing while you are displaced from your home?*

You may feel you do not have the energy or time to even think about that question. However, during stressful times like this, it is even more important than normal to plan for how you can maintain physical and mental wellbeing as best you can.

If you have a job, there may also be pressure on you to provide for many other people in your family and community who are also being impacted by the displacement. There is also no way of telling how long you will be displaced, or what might happen in the future.

This all means that staying as healthy as possible (physically and mentally) really matters. You need to take care of yourself partly so that you can continue to take care of others. You may be staying with relatives or friends, or in a shelter or a camp. What will help you most will depend on your specific circumstances.

Who is this resource for?

Anyone who has had to leave their homes because of armed conflict or natural disaster.

What's in this resource?

In this resource we share some suggestions of things that can help maintain wellbeing during displacement, and support children. As you read the recommendations and ideas in this resource, think about what is possible and what may help YOU, based on your unique situation.

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Strategies to maintain wellbeing during displacement

- **Maintain important relationship groups:** If possible, try to keep your family together and stay with or near people from your community. Relationships with family and friends are very important to wellbeing, and staying closely connected with people you know, love, and respect during this time will really help.
- **Pay attention to when and what you eat:** When you are displaced from your home you can lose control over many things, including what and when you eat. However, what you eat and whether you get some exercise are important for wellbeing. As much as possible, try to make sure that you are eating regularly and getting enough of the right sort of food to keep you healthy.
- **Try to get some exercise:** Safety permitting try to get some movement every day. Stress prepares us to take action. When we are stressed, exercise can give our bodies what it is expecting—a physical workout that helps ease us out of being in high alert all the time.
- **Work:** If you have paid employment, continue to work if possible. In addition to income, this will help provide structure for you, access to valuable information, and a sense of meaning and purpose.
- **Help where you can:** If you still have a job (and especially if you work for an NGO or in another helping profession), many people may be looking to you for leadership, guidance, information, and assistance. This can feel like an additional burden, but it is also a sign that people really value the role you can play during this time.
 - There will be many ways you *cannot* help other people during this time, of course. However, you do have many skills (e.g. technical skills, people leading skills). If you are currently living in a camp or refugee center, consider joining camp committees or community organizing bodies or finding other ways to help your family and community networks.
 - If you can find some ways to use the skills you have to help those around you, this will help create positive sense of purpose and meaning in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. This will be beneficial to you, as well as those you help.
- **Participate in familiar communities as much as possible.** It will help you and your family members if you can participate in gatherings or rituals that have been important to you, and things you would be doing if you were at home. For example, if religious gatherings have been an important part of your life, seek out and attend such gatherings in your new location.
- **Rituals and routine:** Try to create or maintain some rituals that help you feel more peaceful, present, connected, and grounded.
 - These can be linked to what you might be doing if you were at home (e.g., eating meals together as a family, acknowledging birthdays, or organizing and cleaning your living space in the evenings.)
 - They can also be new practices you adopt. For example, each day when you wake up you could offer a prayer or meditation that the displacement will end and the path forward for you and your family will become clearer and easier.

- **Practice gratitude:** During times like these it can be tempting to focus on everything that you have lost, and what is under threat. However, especially when losses and threat are real and significant, intentionally focusing on things you are grateful for can be powerful and stabilizing. You can also make a routine out of this. For example:
 - Each day at sunset you could name one or two things from the day that you feel grateful for, or that were positive moment of peace, happiness, or inspiration.
 - Over dinner with your family, you could discuss what has gone right that day, what you are grateful for, and small things that have brought you happiness.
- **Do things that help you feel more settled where you are:** During this season of your life, it may be very difficult to think of the future with hope and anticipation. It can feel tempting to *not* do things you would normally do if you were at home (like plant rice, or a garden). However, it can be valuable to do things like plant a garden or make a curtain for a window even if you are not sure how long you will be living in your current location.

Helping children during displacement

When children feel insecure and scared, they may start to do things 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 the displacement.

- **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.
 - Remind them that the important thing is that you are all safe and together. Reassure them that the adults are trying to figure out a way for you to return home, and if that is not possible you will build a new home, together.
- **Encourage the child to express feelings and thoughts:** Encourage them to share what they are thinking and feeling. Treat everything they say gently, without judgment or criticism.
- **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. For example, children may:
 - Get very quiet
 - Become angry and difficult
 - Be clingy and want to be near you all the time
 - Complain about their stomach or head hurting, feel sick in other ways
 - Lose their appetite
 - Have trouble getting to sleep, be afraid of sleeping alone, or have dreams or nightmares
 - 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 is really going on.

- **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.
- **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?”
- **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.