

# Stuck somewhere because of COVID-19?

## Here are 10 things that can help you cope

The COVID-19 Pandemic has turned life upside down for people around the world, and the current situation is particularly complicated for many humanitarian workers like you.

You may have had leave from work postponed or planned trips cancelled because of this crisis. You may be stuck in a different country, unable to return home or evacuate because of travel bans. Or maybe you are being instructed to evacuate when you really want to stay where you are.

You are likely feeling some combination of frustration, anxiety, and exhaustion about it all. These feelings are normal. After all, there is a lot to feel anxious and uncertain about right now, and there are many things you can't control in the current situation.

You can't control what's going to happen with regards to a COVID-19 vaccine and the global economy. You can't control what governments will decide to do about country and state borders, and when you'll be able to travel again. You can't control the programming decisions IRC leadership will make in coming days.

But here is the good news...

There are still many things you *can* control.

You can control how you spend your time, the media that you consume, and what you focus on. You can control the perspective you embrace, and what you choose to do to support and maintain your personal wellbeing during these difficult days.

During tough times when you are anxious and overwhelmed, it can be very difficult to remember or identify things you can do to take care of yourself and manage the stress effectively. So here are ten research-supported strategies that can help you manage stress and maintain resilience during the days and weeks ahead.

### 1. Accept what you can control and what you can't

There are many things happening in the world right now that are outside your control and the control of IRC leadership. The global, political, and organizational landscape may feel unpredictable and threatening.

As best you can, identify what you can influence and control, and what you can't. Then, coach yourself to focus on what you can control.

Also, remember that your manager and IRC leadership are likely under a great deal of pressure themselves and doing the best they can to make wise decisions. Strive to approach your colleagues (and family) with patience and empathy.

## 2. Expect to experience some intense and uncomfortable feelings

Expect to feel some complicated and intense feelings related to these events—both now and in the future. During this time you will likely experience more (and more intense) feelings of stress, distress, depression, irritability, hopelessness, panic, anxiety, and grief.

Given what’s happening in the world (and to you, personally), this is natural and normal. When these intense and difficult feelings come, it can also seem that they will never leave. It can help to remind ourselves of the core messages that we would tell a young child, which are just as true for us adults: *Big feelings come, and big feelings also go away again in time. Wait a while, and you will feel better again.*

## 3. Get back to basics

First and foremost, pay attention to the basics of self-care. These foundations powerfully support our body and brain in coping effectively, regulating stress, improving mood, processing information and making good decisions. How well are you doing in these three areas?

- ✓ **Getting enough sleep?** Getting enough sleep at the moment probably means limiting news consumption and work in the evening and deliberately finding ways to calm down and “change the channel” in your brain before bed. Here are two things that can help with this: 1) Don’t talk about COVID-19 too late in the evening; and 2) Read, watch, or do something that has nothing to do with the pandemic before you try to sleep.
- ✓ **Getting some exercise every day?** Even if you have to get creative, move your body! Exercising will help use up some of the many stress chemicals your body is producing and help you feel calmer and less helpless. [Click here to find exercise routines you can do inside.](#)
- ✓ **Eating healthy food?** The food (and drink) you put into your body fuels you. If you put in poor quality fuel, or the wrong type, your body and brain cannot respond and work as effectively. You may have limited options regarding what you eat right now. When you can, however, choose healthy.

## 4. Stay connected with people who are important to you

Stay connected with your people! Even if you can’t be where you want to be right now, or you can’t get physically close to other people, you can still get creative in how you connect. During times of intense stress and physical isolation, it’s even *more* important that we are connecting with loved ones. So use technology and stay in touch with family and friends.

## 5. Create new structure and routines

When the world feels unpredictable and frightening and you can’t do what you’d normally do, one of the best things you *can* do to help yourself cope is make your own life more predictable.

If many of your normal routines have changed (for example, if you are now working from home or a guesthouse instead of the office) one of the best things you can do is create some structure

for yourself. Divide up the day and schedule it. Organize your time. Create achievable to-do lists. And don't forget to put some self-care activities on that list, not just work tasks.

## 6. Put your phone down and step away from the news

Sure, you need to stay informed at some level. However, research is clear that the more exposure you have to the media around this pandemic the more likely you are to feel traumatized and unsafe. So put limits on how much news you consume, and get into the habit of having some phone-free time every day.

You may be surprised at how hard it is put your phone down and walk away from it. However, there is an endless flood of information and updates to process at the moment, and being periodically phone-free is an essential part of giving yourself a break from that dynamic and creating some breathing-room for your brain to rest.

## 7. Look for ways to have fun and enjoy yourself

It feels almost sacrilegious to talk about “having fun” and enjoying yourself when the world is experiencing such a huge challenge, doesn't it? But as a humanitarian worker, feeling conflicted about this particular tension is probably not new to you. And you also know that this pandemic is going to be more of a marathon than a sprint, even once the initial crisis period has passed.

You are going to be able to run farther and faster (and in better spirits) if you are enjoying some parts of the journey. So look for ways to build some fun, pleasure, relaxation and distraction into your day. This might mean watching an episode of something enjoyable (and preferably not too intense) on TV at night after the day's work is done or it may mean something completely different. But seeking out and making time for some fun is important even (maybe especially) during these times.

## 8. Practice anxiety management strategies that work for you

Most of us are going to experience some extra anxiety and worry during this time. Maybe we're worried about loved ones catching the virus, or catching it ourselves. Maybe we're worried about family members, jobs, finances, programs we support... the list goes on.

So what can you do? Well, in addition to putting the other tips we've discussed into practice, now is a good time to practice specific strategies that are great at calming us down when we're feeling anxious.

If you have strategies you've practiced in the past and you know they work well for you, great. Do those. Otherwise, pick one of these 3 options below (or others you know about) and give it a try. If you want more information that will walk you through these techniques, there are lots of resources available online at [the duty of care site](#) and elsewhere on the web:

- ✓ **Deep breathing:** Breathing deeply and slowly (taking a slow, deep breath in and then letting that breath out even more slowly) sends a clear message to your body that you're not in danger and you can

relax. It's super simple, but it's one of the quickest and most effective ways to calm and ground yourself.

- ✓ **Zoom way in:** When you feel your mind starting to jump all over the place or go to dark, scary places, zoom way in and focus only on your next task. Don't let your mind drift to the next thing. Practice being fully present on the next thing you need to do.
- ✓ **Zoom way out:** Zooming way out – looking past tomorrow and the next few weeks or months – can also help. To zoom way out, think about oceans and mountains or look at the stars. Think of history—people who lived 100 years ago, and 1000 years ago. Think of what your great grandparents had endured. Think of how the clouds are gathering on the horizon and you can smell the rain coming. Look at paintings. Listen to music. Read scripture or poetry.

## 9. Connect with a counselor

The IRC has an Employee Assistance and Resilience Program (the EARP) that provides free counseling to IRC staff members and their family, and this counseling is available by phone or video call. Talking to a counselor can be a good way to process some of your thoughts and feelings related to your current situation. So if you feel that you could benefit from talking with a support professional, send an email asking to schedule a session to [IRC@konterrasupport.net](mailto:IRC@konterrasupport.net)

## 10. Make a self-care plan

Because of the strain you're under, it's important that you support yourself during this time. You are more likely to support yourself well if you develop a plan of action. Developing a self-care plan doesn't have to be complicated. To get started, look over all the tips that we've discussed, and then answer these questions:

- What sort of daily “routine” and “schedule” do I want to put in place?
- Which family and friends do I especially want to connect with in the next couple of weeks?
- Where and when will I get my news?
- How will I get some exercise this week?
- What will I do to have fun?
- What will I do to help myself disconnect and switch off from work, and when?
- Will I schedule a counseling session? What would I most like to discuss with a counselor or coach?
- What strategy will I try first if I find myself feeling very anxious, distracted, or overwhelmed?

## A closing note...

Remember, this pandemic *will* end and life will return to a more normal rhythm. In the meantime, be kind to yourself and others. Everyone is stressed and struggling to concentrate and stay grounded. So treat yourself and others gently. And if there are specific ways the IRC can better support you, let us know by sending an email to [DutyOfCare@rescue.org](mailto:DutyOfCare@rescue.org)