



UNITED NATIONS

UN Pre-Deployment Package For Families of Staff in High-Risk Environments

The goal of this section of the package is to provide accessible and comprehensive information for families of United Nations' staff deployed to high-risk environments to help you understand what to expect before, during and after your family member is deployed. It is in a simple Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) format and is designed to provide guidance around the most common issues that may arise.

For the purposes of this document, 'family' is defined as relatives or friends with whom the staff member has a close, personal relationship. This is different from definitions related to eligibility for benefits and entitlements such as a 'beneficiary' and 'eligible family member' which are determined by your family member's agency as their employer.

The United Nations recognises humanitarian work impacts families, both enriching them through diverse and rewarding experiences, and challenging them with rotation and extended absences. While assignment to high-risk duty stations is vital to UN operations, separation from family and wider networks of support presents specific challenges. Acknowledging this reality by addressing common concerns around logistics, entitlements, communication, family life and psychosocial support engenders a culture of care and support for staff and their families alike.

Having a family member assigned to a hardship duty station can be unsettling, leaving many questions around how to manage the 'new normal.' Starting this dialogue as early as possible opens up lines of communication within the family, community and agency, ensuring your ability to make informed, considered decisions.

1 We have the assignment, now what? Being informed ahead of time.

1. ***What are the risks involved?***

- Ensure you have explicit knowledge of the 'risk disclosure.'
- Seek clarity about applicable insurance policies.

2. ***What are my family member's entitlements I may need to be aware of?***

- Relocation, Repatriation, Education, Health, Travel: you need to know!
- Who can I contact about these and how?

3. ***When will I see my partner/spouse/family member?***

- Get simplified entitlement checklists and/or FAQs on: R&R cycles, home leave and annual leave.
- What is the agency policy about adding leave to R&R?
- Make note of potential issues and exceptions to leave policies to help you prepare for all eventualities as families often structure their lives around leave and expected visits. For example, relying on an R&R cycle to see your family member, only to discover it restarts at zero when the staff member leaves the duty station for training.

4. ***What happens in case of emergency?***

- Who do we contact if we cannot reach our family member?
- Who is the family liaison in case of emergency?
- How does medical evacuation work? Who will contact me?

2 Deployment, how to prepare and what to expect.

1. ***What will my family member encounter?***

- Check the embassy websites and other sources for country and regional briefings; see if you can obtain copies of briefs that your family member receives.
- Stay informed with trusted news sources; ask your family member what the "reality" of the situation is compared with the information you obtain through news outlets.
- Connect with other families with members in the same location.

2. ***How might my family respond?***

a) Coping with stress:

- 'Normal' responses to extreme experiences such as those humanitarians are exposed to in natural disasters, conflict, and post conflict areas vary widely.

- Having an awareness of and seeking resources to support your understanding of the normal, frequently intense, feelings that can impact staff in highly distressing and/or high-risk work environments is important. Some UN agencies offer confidential counselling services to staff and dependents – if applicable, be sure you have the contact information of the counsellors covering your family member’s duty station.
 - Seeking additional resources and/or professional support when the signs and symptoms are concerning. Insurance may cover sessions with a mental health professional.
- b) Supporting psychological resilience and thriving in challenging environments:
- Meaning and purpose often drive the work of humanitarians – taking time to explore this with your family member fosters shared understanding and goals.
 - Sharing your learnings through adversity with your family member reinforces your parallel journey.
- c) Recognizing signs of stress, trauma and burnout:
- Being aware of significant changes in your family member’s physical and mental health; seeking professional advice when noticing physical, behavioural, relational, and emotional warning signs.

3 How can we thrive as a family living separately?

1. Ways of maintaining connection as a family:
 - Planning communication ahead of time - daily messages, regular calls, weekly video calls - to reflect your family’s needs. Try and be proactive and plan ahead of the deployment but anticipate that schedules will change throughout and internet telephone connectivity may not always be reliable. You will need to be flexible and adapt.
 - Creating new and adapting old family rituals to strengthen the sense of connection and cohesion when together and apart.
 - Remembering to care for relationship needs; fostering understanding and support in ways relevant and meaningful to the individuals involved.
 - Recognizing the higher levels of stress and change being managed by both partners, addressing their individual concerns - acknowledge the challenges faced by all family members and being aware that sometimes there are no easy solutions.
2. Guiding children through transitions:
 - Exploring children’s thoughts and feelings throughout the process.
 - Taking a non-judgmental stance to your child’s experience, there is no ‘right way’ for the child to respond - some children will adjust quickly, others may experience highly variable and/or complicated feelings and behaviour while adapting to their new family life.
 - Liaising with the school and/or child care to increase the child’s informed support system during times of stress and change.
 - Highlighting your child’s resilience and ability to cope by reinforcing positive strategies, reminding them of times they have managed difficulties, and supporting them in creating their own meanings.

- Remembering that your own stress management serves as a powerful model directly impacting your child's ability to cope – thus making self-care an important tool in helping your family adapt.

4 Where can I find support?

1. Increasing your focus on self-care:

- a) Physical: making sure you get regular exercise, eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, consider incorporating breathing and muscle relaxation practices into your routine.
- b) Cognitive: having realistic expectations of yourself, practicing gentle acceptance of your mixed feelings around living separately, viewing stress as normal with awareness of its signs and impact, practicing gratitude as you look for the positives around you and create meaning out of your experience.
- c) Emotional: noticing your emotional state with curiosity, allowing emotional expression without judgement, find ways to connect and share your experience with trusted others.
- d) Spiritual: participate in a community of meaning and purpose, pray and/or meditate, explore nature, engage in art and music.

2. Engaging and enhancing your social network – your family, friends, colleagues and community who care about and support you.

- Creating an emergency contact/ support list of friends and family.
- Reaching out for additional support, taking time to meet or speak with friends about your experience.
- Planning ahead to have family and close friends visit for fun, celebrations or just plain support.

3. Do I have access to mental health services?

- Asking for the contact information of staff counsellors.
- Seeking referrals for outside/specialist providers when needed. Understanding the type of contract and insurance entitlements for dependents is important for seeking mental health services, and also for understanding the full range of medical benefits available to you and your family.

4. Where can I find peer support?

- Joining UN families or other expatriate peer support groups on social media.
- Reaching out to other families in the UN system, creating links with others who can relate to your experience.

5 The ups and downs of re-entry, what might happen?

1. Why isn't this easier?

- The staff member's return, no matter how joyfully anticipated, can be surprisingly disruptive to the family; new routines have necessarily developed in their absence, some time to transition is needed by all.

- The family and its members' moods and behaviour might be unusual during this period, awareness and understanding of this transition is helpful.
2. Exit again!
- Anxiety around the family member's next anticipated departure can start well before the actual date of exit and often creates anxiety; take the time to acknowledge your family's current experiences, providing additional time and space for connection and reassurance.
 - Create some predictable routines around re-entry, visits and exit, weaving the 'new normal' into your family patterns.

6 Can I create meaning and purpose while also being critical?

1. Create and share your family's story:
- Consciously explore the challenges and successes you've experienced individually, and as a family.
 - Be aware and understanding of diversity within your family; members can and often will be divergent in their understanding and feelings around this lifestyle.
 - Collaboratively discuss ways in which your perspectives are similar or not, from a stance of curiosity and empathy, finding points of shared meaning and purpose.
 - Share with your friends, family and community your unique journey; let them inside your experience.
 - Look for opportunities to support other families in the same or a similar situation; your knowledge and guidance can make all the difference to others.
2. Evaluate:
- Allowing space in the family for assessment of individual needs acknowledges the challenging reality of the work - be honest with yourself and gentle with others.
 - Valuing and seeking opportunities for personal growth; how can you pursue daily meaning in your life through connection, work, education, recreation, and travel?