

# First aid for those affected by war



Living in a war zone, fleeing one, and fearing for your life can leave wounds that are not only physical but also psychological. Long after the events have occurred, it is not uncommon for feelings such as fear, helplessness, and despair to linger. So how exactly do these psychological wounds manifest? And what can you do to take care of yourself in such distressing times?

We hope the following information provides you with some initial support on self-care and your mental health.

## Possible impacts of living in a war zone or escaping one

Living in a war zone or escaping one can be traumatic and many experience extreme fear, helplessness, and horror. Others may feel rather numb or detached from their own physical body. These feelings can occur after being confronted with threats that are difficult to cope with, and that set our minds and bodies on high alert.

For some, these threats may consist of serious injury or actual or imminent death. However, we do not have to experience such threats ourselves to be impacted psychologically. For example, worrying about the safety of a family member, or learning about these traumatic events first-hand, can cause similar effects.



## Signs of psychological stress

How one person reacts to a traumatic event varies from person to person. A reaction is not simply a factor of how severe the trauma experienced was, but it is also related to how someone usually deals with their emotions. As a result, while some may be able to steadily process their experience of the war, others may still be under great stress weeks after the experience. For some, the prolonged stress can be explained by childcare, financial concerns, or rebuilding a life altogether. For others, it may feel like their emotions and behavior are taking a life of their own.

These psychological effects don't always immediately come to light, and sometimes it feels like emotions, images, and thoughts manifest at random. These may have been repressed thoughts and can result in mood swings, nervousness, or concentration problems. Throughout the day, traumatic memories may come up, or physical symptoms such as nausea or headaches may appear. Children and adolescents may have difficulty with sleep, have nightmares, and complain about physical symptoms such as abdominal pain. Some children replay the experience or express their emotions through drawings or play.

These very reactions may be stressful, but in light of what you have experienced, they are understandable. Accepting these as such is an important aspect of your self-healing journey. It takes time to process traumatic experiences, especially as it pertains to being in a war zone or feeling one. It will also take time to feel safe in what may be a new environment for you.

It may take some time for your mind and body to leave the state of alarm it went into. In the meantime, here are some proven tips you can try to support yourself.

Of all the self-help tips presented, some may suit you very well, while others may not suit you at all. Please pick out the ones that are most likely to meet your needs and help you. This can mean different things at different times.

## Immediate help

If you are in a safe and protected environment, you may still feel restless and feel the need to stay as active as possible. You may feel exhausted as a result. It is important that you find a way to slow down. In order to do that, you may look to activities that usually help. This could mean lying down in bed with a book, going for a walk, or doing sports. Give space to other (calmer) thoughts and activities.

However, be careful not to distract yourself from all your thoughts, as it could drain your energy and lead to exhaustion instead of recovery. Giving space to your thoughts, feelings, and memories by talking about them with familiar people can be a powerful start to self-healing. Some find it helps to set a fixed time for the conversation. Share what you feel comfortable sharing, there is no need to push your limits. At times, silence and withdrawal can also be effective coping strategies. If you cannot or do not want to talk, you can try writing down how you are feeling about your experience.

These tips may seem too simple, or overwhelming. Instead of looking at everything you can do, it is helpful to focus on what you would like to achieve – step by step. This can give back something that may have been lost due to exposure to war-related traumatic events: a sense of control and self-determination.

But what can you do to look after yourself and your mental health in the long term after having been in a war zone or fleeing one? To start, let's take a look at our basic needs.

## Support Helplines

If you feel that talking about your experience could help you, but you are worried about burdening your family or friends, there are people with whom you can have these conversations. You can find a compassionate and trustworthy listener, for example, at the "TelefonSeelsorge" in Germany, the Russian-speaking telephone counseling service "Doweria" or "krisenchat". These services are free of charge, anonymous, and available 24/7. The staff is specially trained for crisis support and can also refer you to other helpful services.

## Dealing with suicidal thoughts

Suicidal thoughts can occur in times of crisis and are not always a cause for alarm. Sometimes, they may pass on their own. However, if you notice that your thoughts about death are getting louder, if you feel that you can't control them, or if they turn into concrete plans and behaviors to take your life, you should get help immediately.

If this is the case, please reach out to a trusted person, a helpline, or call **112**, a number you can use to access the emergency services in all EU countries. You can also use the emergency call app "nora" (website in [German](#) and [English](#)). With this app, you can contact a rescue center and your location will be transmitted automatically. Both the emergency number and the emergency app are free of charge.



### TelefonSeelsorge

0800 111 0 111 or 0800 111 0 222 / [telefonseelsorge.de](https://www.telefonseelsorge.de)  
(German, counseling is also available via chat or e-mail)

### Doweria

030 440 308 454 (in Russian, also via Doweria chat on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8 pm to 10 pm:  
[www.doweria-chat.de](https://www.doweria-chat.de))

### Krisenchat

chat counseling for children and adolescents up to 25 years of age at [krisenchat.de](https://www.krisenchat.de) and [krisenchat.de/ukraine](https://www.krisenchat.de/ukraine) (in Ukrainian and Russian)

## Self-care for long term wellness: fulfilling your basic needs

Everyone has basic needs. We all know and feel this – especially when our own needs are not met. When we mention needs, we often think of physical needs such as eating, drinking, and sleeping. In addition to physical needs, we all have basic psychological needs that can influence our behavior, thoughts, and feelings. These needs, like the physical needs, must be met to find stability and feel at ease. So it is not only important to take care of our physical well-being – by eating, drinking, and sleeping enough, for example – but also of our psychological well-being.

### The four basic psychological needs

#### Attachment

Attachment refers to the need for human contact, or the closeness and attachment to other people. This closeness can be of physical or emotional nature. For some it may translate into feeling secure, at ease, and comfortable in the presence of family.

#### Self-worth

Refers to the need to feel good about ourselves, to feel competent, and valued. This also translates into the need to feel loved by others for who we are.

Being in a war zone or fleeing one can directly violate these basic needs. For example, being separated from those we are close to violates our need for attachment. Not knowing what will happen next and what tomorrow puts a strain on our sense of control and self-determination. Finally, the instances that lead to self-worth and other pleasant experiences are lost. For example, the things we used to enjoy, were good at or received recognition for.

Knowing what you can do to fulfill these basic psychological needs is a powerful step towards feeling better again.



#### Control and self-determination

Refers to the desire to feel in control. This can mean understanding what is going on, being free to make our own decisions, and acting freely and independently.

#### Pleasure

Refers to the need to experience pleasant and positive emotions and avoid unpleasant, painful experiences.



## Attachment

### *Harness strength by connecting with others.*

- Talk to other people about what you have experienced.
- Allow yourself to retreat and have moments of silence.
- Stay in touch with family, friends, and significant others.
- Experience emotions together and allow yourself to grieve together.
- Plan activities and try to create positive memories together.



### **Dealing with guilt**

We often feel guilt when we believe we have done something that contradicts our moral standards. For example, someone who had to leave their partner behind may feel guilt and believe they “don’t deserve” their safety because they have “abandoned” a close one. For those who have been in a war zone or fled one, these feelings of guilt are not uncommon.

If this situation sounds familiar: you need to remember the context in which you made the decision and remind yourself that you did the right thing at that moment. Perhaps you got yourself to safety, and maybe your children, other family members, acquaintances, or even pets. They, too, deserve to know you are with them. If you came alone: you have the right to be safe, even if others are not.

**If the feelings of guilt persist, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:**

- Does the feeling of guilt serve me and the people around me, or does it cause more harm than good?
- Would I judge other people in my situation?
- How would I talk to a friend who is in my situation? Would I blame them or show understanding?
- Could I really influence the circumstances that led to my behavior?

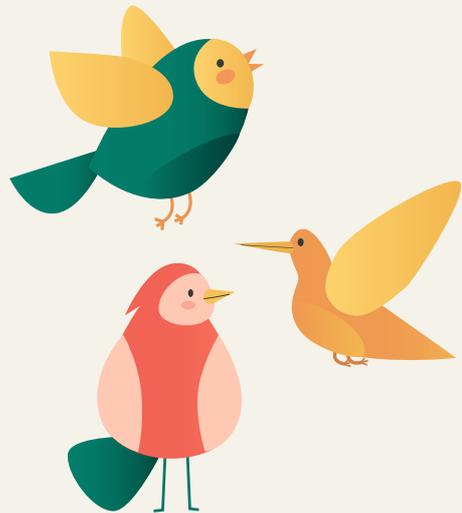
You may try to counter the feelings of guilt by actively and consciously doing something good for yourself – even if you feel “undeserving” of good things. You deserve to take special care of yourself right now and allow yourself to feel positive emotions. It may also help to share your feelings of guilt with others. This can provide relief and reassurance that you are not alone. The most important thing, however, is that you eventually forgive yourself. This can take time – allow yourself to take that time.



## Control and self-determination

*Redefine what control means to you and overcome powerlessness.*

- Find a (new) daily structure. For example, if daily tasks such as cooking, going for a walk, and doing laundry seem comforting, try to resume them.
- Establish (new) routines and try to stick to them.
- Give your thoughts and feelings space and make time for them. Allow yourself to feel sad or cry if you feel like it.
- Pay conscious attention to the things you can influence, for example, how you want to organize your time.
- Set small goals and always focus on the next step, rather than all the steps at once.



## Avoid information overload

Reading about the war in the news and keeping track of what is happening can help us maintain a feeling of control over a situation. On the other hand, if we are constantly refreshing the news pages online and looking for something new, it can be overwhelming and make us feel helpless.

Similarly, staying in touch with loved ones can bring relief on the one hand, but it may also contribute to keeping our bodies and minds in a constant state of alarm. It is best to find your own balance and set your own rules for exchanging information with others or watching the news.

For example, many people find it helpful not to read the news immediately after getting up or before going to bed, but rather at a set time during the day. Taking yourself out of the action for a while can help you gather strength to be able to process and process information in a meaningful way.



## Self worth

*Finding space for both – showing up for yourself and others.*

- Take care of yourself:
  - Did you sleep enough?
  - Have you eaten enough?
  - Did you drink enough water?
  - Did you maintain your social contacts?
  - Did you allow yourself to take breaks?
- Don't forget what makes you who you are outside the war.
- Think consciously about the things you have achieved and accomplished. These strengths and accomplishments will accompany you even in these difficult times.



### Strengthen the self

If possible, try to pursue your interests and create space for yourself. Even though war may have influenced all aspects of your life, you are much more than just a “victim” or “refugee”. Maybe you are a student, a musician, a mechanic? Perhaps you like to cook, are interested in art, or play sports regularly.

It is important that you remember these different aspects of your personality, especially in these hard times. You may perceive these activities as “luxuries” at the moment, but they can help you process what you're going through. It is essential to be kinder and more caring to yourself now than ever.



## Pleasure

*In stressful times, try to give space to positive emotions.*

- Create positive moments and allow yourself distractions. Reflect on what activities give you some relief. You know best what you need right now.
- Keep moving. Walking or exercising can help you feel better and relieve tension.
- If you know a relaxation exercise (e.g., meditation, autogenic training), try to practice it.
- Take regular breaks and time-outs.



### **Giving space to positive emotions**

Right now, it may seem impossible or inappropriate to allow yourself to feel positive emotions like joy, relaxation, or pleasure. But it is precisely because times are so difficult that you should seek out as many pleasant moments as you can.

We call these moments and activities “strength-givers.” They are activities that cause or strengthen your sense of well-being and that give you energy. For some people, this may mean exercising. For others, it may help to engage in activities that remind them of home, like cooking a certain dish. But “strength-givers” can also be very small moments, such as letting the sun shine on your face for a few minutes. If possible, actively search for these sources of strength. And if you find them, permit yourself to enjoy them.

### **Dealing with overthinking and worrying**

The word ‘rumination’ refers to recurring stressful thoughts and vicious circles that don’t seem to have an end. It may be helpful to try breaking these thoughts down. Try to observe your thoughts without judging them. What challenges are you struggling with? Which questions remain unanswered?

To better sort out your thoughts, it can be helpful to write them down. Some people find it helpful to put their thoughts down on paper every morning or evening. When worries become too burdensome, it can help to deliberately distract yourself. Instead of watching the news from home and adding to the worries, you can consciously occupy yourself with other things that demand your full attention for a while. This can mean exercising, going out into nature, or watching a series.

## Do I need long-term professional help?

In order to process war-related traumatic events, you may want to turn to professional help but it isn't the only possible avenue. Some have found solstice in speaking with trusted people or using self-help tools.

Whether and to what extent you require professional support for self-healing depends on how strongly you feel burdened and affected in your life by what you have experienced. If, for example, your complaints severely impact your everyday life, persist for a particularly long time, or are intensifying over time, it may make sense to seek medical and/or psychotherapeutic advice.

The aim is to assess your situation together with a trained professional and clarify it. In some cases, it may be helpful to seek additional support through medication. Although the effects are limited to short-term relief, medication can help to "calm down" the situation a little for the time being and make it more bearable. At that point, psychotherapy becomes a suitable option for more in-depth processing of the traumatic experience.

### How to find a psychotherapist

If you are looking for a psychotherapist, the patient service under 116 117 can help you find a doctor or psychotherapist. This number also offers a medical on-call service for emergencies.



## Post-traumatic stress disorder

In some cases, the psychological wounds left by traumatizing experiences are so deep that a post-traumatic stress disorder may develop. This is especially true in the case of prolonged, man-made traumas such as being in a war zone or fleeing one. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder usually appear within six months of experiencing extreme stress and primarily include:

### 1. Re-experiencing

The trauma is repeatedly experienced through unwanted memories, images, or dreams as if it were taking place in the here and now.

### 2. Avoidance

Affected individuals may avoid certain places, stop watching the news completely, constantly distract themselves or stop going out altogether.

### 3. Agitation and arousal

Affected persons may be more irritable, experience outbursts of anger, or suffer from sleeping disorders and concentration problems.

If you believe you may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, you may need psychotherapeutic help. Cognitive-behavioral therapy has been proven to help those suffering. The goal of this type of therapy is to work through the experience by giving it a voice. This is done verbally, but you may also wish to write it down.

The principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy allow people to address each memory, one by one. It is a bit like picking up each thought and memory individually, letting it speak, and putting it back in a more ordered way. In addition, therapy can help you to deal with stressful thoughts and feelings and improve your well-being.

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