

Afghanistan Crisis – August 2021

The Phoenix Centre is aware of the distress that people from the Australian Afghan community are currently experiencing in relation to the crisis in Afghanistan. We also acknowledge that this situation may trigger responses from other people from refugee backgrounds who have had similar experiences or whose countries are also experiencing unrest.

The following information is for those working in support services and includes tips on providing emotional support and containment to those most affected by this situation.

What to expect

High levels of distress are an expected and normal response to this highly stressful and frightening situation. This includes intense worry and fear about loved ones remaining in Afghanistan or nearby.

Additionally, people seeking asylum and people on temporary visas from Afghanistan are likely to express increased fears for their safety due to their uncertain visa status.

The following reactions are likely to be common over the coming weeks in response to the unfolding situation:

- A range of overwhelming feelings including helplessness, desperation, anger, sadness, irritability, anxiety, stress, despair, exhaustion, and frustration.
- Persistent and intrusive worries and fears.
- Persistent tearfulness, difficulty containing emotions and surges of emotions out of context (e.g. becoming tearful in the supermarket for no apparent reason).
- Memories of past traumatic experiences.
- Changes in sleep and appetite.
- Depending on the emotional state evoked in someone (e.g. alert, alarm, fear, terror), this can impact on their sense of time and concentration (e.g. an impact on someone's ability to think, plan and respond to tasks and those around them).
- Lowered mood and/or numbness.
- Difficulty in completing daily tasks.
- Physical sensations (e.g. body aches and pains, headaches, upset digestion, vision difficulties, dizziness, heart palpitations, sweating, shaking hands/body, breathing difficulties).
- Additionally, children and young people may also exhibit increased clinginess; tantrums/emotional outbursts; act younger than their age (e.g. return to bed wetting, need more help with tasks); express worry about seeing their parents and family members upset; be less engaged in school/learning and other activities; want to spend more time on technology devices; withdraw from friends, family and peers and/or appear hyperactive and hyper-alert.

It is also very common for people to seek information and advice about the current situation in Afghanistan, possible migration channels, and options for contacting, finding and/or finding support for, family and friends in Afghanistan or overseas.

Community Leaders will also be experiencing significant pressure due to the direct impacts of this situation on their own family and friends, as well as due to the increased responsibilities arising across their communities.

While the above responses are to be expected, it is also completely appropriate if people from the impacted community do not present as distressed and just want to get on with things. This is also a normal reaction and we should not expect only an overt distress response.

The following reactions indicate the need for additional support:

- Self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts, behaviours or plans (if someone is at immediate risk of harm to themselves or others contact 000).
- Inability to attend to any self-care needs or accept help from others.
- Should someone experience the following for a period of time, beyond 4 weeks, it is important to discuss referral options for more ongoing support including counselling:
 - Prolonged distress and physical symptoms without some return to routine or previously enjoyable activities
 - Prolonged self-isolation from family, friends or regular supports and important activities, such as school

If you are concerned that someone's response is beyond a common reaction, seek support. Supports can include:

- GPs and other trusted professionals
- Lifeline 24/7 (13 11 14)
- Kids Helpline 24/7 (1800 551 800)
- Phoenix Centre – Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania (6221 0999)

How you can help

- **Listen.** Before anything else, let them know you care and are listening. Acknowledging their feelings and responses, including their pain and fear, is a powerful act of solidarity and care. Check what is most of concern to them without making assumptions as to what they need.
- Resist the urge to find quick solutions – this situation is complex and the resulting distress is profound. If appropriate, share that their reactions are expected and

normal given the circumstance. Not everyone who is distressed will want or need practice advice or counselling. Instead, check in about their further support needs.

- Expect that people will have difficulties managing emotions, may have had little sleep and may be pre-occupied by worry and fear. Over the coming weeks, have realistic expectations in relation to people's capacity, including completing daily tasks related to work, home life, settlement and/or learning.
- Encourage times of rest and breaks from media, particularly before bed.
- Encourage regular soothing activities, such as spending time with trusted friends and family, walks or other physical activities, listening to music, prayer, healthy snacks etc.
- Consider the importance of communicating in someone's first language and the use of bi-cultural workers and accredited interpreters.
- Due to the potential impact on someone's memory, it is important to provide advice in simple and clear language, and check in with someone's understanding.
- It is important that key information might need to be repeated in order to support retention and recall, e.g. send frequent appointment reminders.
- Only offer practice advice when it is appropriate for the person's situation and check relevant websites for up to date information. Information sources include:
 - Australian Red Cross – Restoring Family Links Hotline, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm (AEST) on 1800 875 199 or tracing@redcross.org.au
 - In country information ([UNHCR](#))
- For parents/carers it can be useful to:
 - Share simple information about common responses in children and young people (see above).
 - Understand that children and young people commonly find it helpful when parents/carers are able to acknowledge that something upsetting is happening (using age appropriate information), and when they can ask questions.
 - Continue a regular routine as much as possible – this can help provide a sense of safety and predictability.
 - Take time for enjoyable activities, e.g. sport, movies, play, seeing friends.
 - Set limits about watching news and media.
 - Understand that when parents/carers take care of themselves, they can help children and young people feel more safe.

Ask if they would like you to check in again and make a plan for this. People will often prefer to speak with someone they have an existing relationship with and might have a preference to talk with you rather than be referred to another service. However, if someone requests a counselling referral, it is important to respect this and refer to an appropriate support service.

For staff and colleagues who are from Afghanistan

- Expect high levels of distress and check in showing you care. At the same time, respect that some may want to talk about this situation while others may prefer not to.
- Staff may need time to make important phone calls and provide support to family, friends and community members. Check in about what their specific needs are at this time.
- Some staff may need to take some time off from work, while others might want to just proceed with expected responsibilities.

Looking after yourself

- It is common when supporting people under extreme stress to also feel overwhelmed, upset, and worried. This is normal.
- Remind yourself what is within your control and role and what is not – have reasonable expectations of yourself. Remember the humanising power of kindness and empathy.
- Attend to your own self-care – take breaks, talk to colleagues and other supports and do activities that calm and soothe you.

Be kind to your mind resources

The Phoenix Centre has developed a range of messages to remind us of small things we can do to be kind to ourselves and others during uncertain times. The 'Be kind to your mind' resources are available in 11 different languages on the MRC Tas website:

<https://mrctas.org.au/phoenix-centre-resources/>