



TOLERATING UNCERTAINTY  
AND MANAGING ANXIETY  
WHEN POLITICAL EVENTS FEEL  
THREATENING



KONTERRA  
RESILIENCE

# TOLERATING UNCERTAINTY AND MANAGING ANXIETY WHEN POLITICAL EVENTS FEEL THREATENING

During times of political or social change, it's natural to feel uncertain about what the future may hold and to experience a range of intense emotions, including anxiety, anger, and grief. This is especially true when political or social changes challenge core beliefs, conflict with your values, or raise concerns about your safety.

This resource outlines strategies you can use to manage anxiety, reduce rumination, and regain a sense of calm and control during unpredictable or volatile times.

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## 1. Acknowledge the difficulty and how you are feeling

Recognize that it is okay to experience strong emotions when you are deeply concerned about a situation that feels beyond your control. Events that suggest a loss of stability or violation of rights create a sense of uncertainty and threat. Feeling angry and scared in response to this is normal. Acknowledging your feelings (rather than ignoring or denying them) is an important step in coping well. You will likely find it helpful to name how you are feeling and reflect on why. Talking to trusted friends, writing, or just acknowledging to yourself can help. Try this:

- Finish the phrase "I am feeling..." to better understand what is surfacing. It may help to refer to a "feelings wheel" if you are having trouble finding the right words.

## 2. Focus on what you can control and influence

When events feel unpredictable or threatening, it is helpful to identify what you can control or influence and separate those things from what is beyond your control. Focusing on things you can influence reduces feelings of overwhelm and powerlessness. While you cannot control external events like political outcomes or the actions of others, you can take small, actionable steps to care for yourself and others. Try these things:

- Write down a list of things that are currently causing you stress. Next, separate them into three categories: "Things I can control," "Things I can influence," and "Things I cannot control." This helps clarify where to focus your energy and can help you let go of the things that are beyond your control.
- List the specific actions you can take in your role to support positive change, even if they seem small. Every positive action matters.

## 3. Practice grounding techniques to manage strong anxiety

When uncertainty looms large, the mind tends to spiral into worst-case scenarios. And when anxiety builds, it becomes very difficult to concentrate or think clearly and it is easy to get caught in cycles of rumination—repeatedly thinking about negative events, worries, or problems without finding solutions.

When you are feeling very anxious, practice calming yourself, stopping rumination, and changing your focus. Calming techniques can help lower your anxiety levels and ground you back in what is happening around you right now. Once you feel calmer, consciously shift your focus to something that brings a sense of control or perspective.

Try these things to ground yourself:

- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Exercise:** Take a few deep breaths and focus on what you see, hear, or feel around you. Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Remind yourself that while the future is unknown, you are safe in this present moment.
- **Practice deep breathing:** Sit in a comfortable position, place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of four, allowing your abdomen to rise as you fill your lungs. Hold your breath for a count of four, then slowly exhale through your mouth for another count of four. Repeat this cycle 5–10 times, focusing on the rise and fall of your abdomen. This helps activate your body's relaxation response, calming your mind and reducing physical tension.
- **Recognize when you are ruminating and use "distanced self-talk":** Awareness is the first step in breaking the rumination cycle. Take a moment to notice when your thoughts are circling back to the same worries or problems in a way that intensifies negative feelings without leading to any resolution. Label it as "rumination" to differentiate it from productive problem-solving. Now, talk to yourself about what you are experiencing in the third person (use "you" refer to yourself by name). This sort of distanced self-talk helps reduce rumination and manage anxiety by creating psychological distance which allows you to observe your situation more objectively and reduces the intensity of negative emotions. Here is how to use distanced self-talk:
  - ⇒ Refer to yourself by name: "Chris, you've handled stressful situations like this before, and you will again."
  - ⇒ Use "you" instead of "I": "You are feeling anxious right now, but this feeling will pass."
  - ⇒ Frame it as advice: Imagine you are coaching a friend through the situation and apply the same tone to yourself: "You know you're capable of handling this, and you've learned from past experiences."
- **Zoom out:** "Zoom out" your perspective to take a long view on life. Look past today's news cycle and think about things that help you take a wide-angle view on life. This might be oceans, stars, the events that previous generations endured. Remind yourself that new opportunities and systems may emerge from what currently feels like chaos and darkness.

## 4. Practice radical acceptance

Radical acceptance is about fully accepting your current reality as it is—without resistance. It does not mean you approve of or are okay with the situation, but it acknowledges that fighting against the uncontrollable only adds to suffering. By accepting that you are in a situation where uncertainty is unavoidable, you can begin to release some of the emotional energy tied up in wishing things were different. This frees you to focus on what is within your control. Try this:

- When anxious thoughts about the future arise, repeat to yourself, "You cannot control what will happen, but you can control how you respond right now." This shift can help reduce feelings of powerlessness.

## 5. Craft a safety plan

If you are living or working somewhere where current events may place your life, safety, or freedom at risk, maintaining situational awareness and having a safety plan can help you feel prepared and significantly reduce anxiety. You should stay informed about potential threats and know emergency procedures. Try these things:

- **Figure out what will help you stay informed while minimizing the risk of unhelpful overwhelm.** You may choose to connect with local contacts, follow trusted news sources, use security briefing services, monitor social media (cautiously), subscribe to embassy alerts if you are living abroad, or use a threat-tracking app that offers localized information or alerts.
- **Establish a communication plan.** Set up secure channels for family/team communication and establish a routine for checking in with each other, especially during times of heightened risk.
- **Make sure all family and team members know how to access emergency contacts and what the protocol is in case of sudden danger.** Regularly review security protocols with your team and family and have open discussions about how to handle escalating situations.
- **Keep a go-bag ready** in case you need to leave your home or evacuate. Visit KonTerra's online resource library (<https://www.konterragroup.net/staff-care-resources/>) and search for "go bag" to find a packing list and "evacuation" for resources on managing stress during evacuations.

## 6. Connect with other people

Isolation can heighten anxiety during uncertain times and (especially in dangerous contexts) having a solid support network is essential. Others within your community are also likely to feel scared, angry, and upset, so reach out to trusted friends, family members, or colleagues, even if they are not physically nearby. Sharing your concerns, listening to others who may be grappling with similar emotions, and discussing solutions or safety plans together can strengthen important relationships and reduce feelings of vulnerability and the stress of being "stuck" in a difficult situation. Try these things:

- Ask how others are doing (especially those who are most vulnerable to the impact of these events) and be trustworthy and supportive with regards to what they may tell you about their own feelings and experiences.
- Especially if you are in a dangerous context, build relationships with trusted colleagues, community members, and local security contacts.

## 7. Practice basic self-care

Living and working in volatile political and social contexts is emotionally draining. Prioritizing mental health and building resilience is crucial for long-term wellbeing. It is easy to neglect self-care when you are constantly feeling threatened or overwhelmed by big emotions. However, maintaining regular habits like exercise, adequate sleep, and nutritious eating will greatly improve your ability to cope over time. Try this:

- Think about how you are currently sleeping, eating, and exercising. What can you do to support yourself to make healthy choices in these three areas this week?<sup>1</sup>

## 8. Do things to help defuse your stress reactions

Fear and uncertainty cause physical responses—your body prepares to protect you from the threat and the result is tension and stress reactions. Look for ways to use and express this stress-related energy, rather than only trying to ignore or contain it. Try these things<sup>2</sup>:

- **Move your body to release tension**—walk, run, dance, cry, yell into pillows
- **Create something**—cook, paint, write, garden, knit, mend, do a puzzle
- **Organize something**—clean a cupboard, organize a draw, pack a go-bag, sort some files

## 9. Limit media exposure

It is important to be well-informed about what is happening and how you may be able to take action. Read articles or listen to podcasts published by sources with a reputation for balanced and quality reporting. Look for answers to any questions you have.

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<sup>1</sup> If you're struggling to sleep, visit KonTerra's online resource library and search for "better sleep" to find our resource on *Tips for Getting Better Sleep in Insecure or High Threat Environments*.

<sup>2</sup> Want more information on this? Visit KonTerra's online resource library and search for "stress and self-care".

However, there is a difference between staying informed and compulsively surfing social media or the news. Limit your exposure to social media and the news, especially if you feel overwhelmed by it. Past a certain point, exposure to other people's fear, anguish, and outrage is likely to intensify your own distressing emotions in unhelpful ways.

Decide specific times or ways to consume news that impacts your immediate safety and avoid getting caught in 24-hour news loops. This allows you to stay aware without being overwhelmed by information that you cannot act on. Try these things:

- Turn off all news notifications
- Set specific times to check the news (e.g., in the morning and at lunch)
- Avoid scrolling right before bed

## 10. Set boundaries around anxiety-provoking conversations

It is important to protect your mental space, especially when discussions about the future can lead to intense debates or stress. Setting boundaries with friends, family, or colleagues about how much you want to discuss political or current events can help you avoid burnout and manage anxiety. Try this:

- If you find yourself repeatedly being drawn into conversations that feel unproductive and demoralizing, let people know politely but firmly that you need to step back from certain conversations at this time for your own mental wellbeing.

## 11. Take action towards positive change

When you are well-informed and your own anxiety is manageable, you will be better placed to take purposeful action that helps restore some sense of control and positive purpose. There may be multiple ways you can do this, including donating, demonstrating, protesting, sharing your own story, offering practical help to those in need of support, and having conversations with those around you and in power about important issues.

## 12. Seek professional support

If feelings of anxiety, fear, or hopelessness are becoming overwhelming, it may be helpful to seek support from a counselor or mental health professional. There are many resources available for managing stress and uncertainty, both locally and online. Try these things:

- Many organizations have resources available to help staff cope with pressure. If your employer offers counseling as an employee assistance benefit, make an appointment with a counselor through this program.
- Reach out to national helplines or community organizations for support.

## Managing your distress and anxiety is likely to be an ongoing process. **Repeat all tips, as necessary.**

Remember, it is okay to feel uncertain and anxious during turbulent or dangerous times. Taking small, manageable steps each day can make a big difference in how you navigate through these feelings. By focusing on what you can control, seeking connection, and prioritizing your wellbeing, you can help protect your wellbeing even when circumstances feel unpredictable.

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## ABOUT KON TERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



### **Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:**

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: [info@konterragroup.net](mailto:info@konterragroup.net).