

Getting ready for your emergency deployment

28 November 2024

Key points

- Do not leave preparations to the last minute, both in the office and at home.
- Honestly assess your physical and psychological readiness for deployment.
- Take care of your health – make sure to do your medical and dental appointments, vaccinations, and renew prescriptions for your regular medicine.
- Ensure your travel documents are valid.
- Use available resources on the Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal, the UNHCR Operational Portal, Reliefweb, etc. to learn about the operational context and UNHCR's work in the country.

1. Overview

Preparing for your emergency deployment usually requires you to consider three areas. This Entry discusses:

- Psychological preparedness – for you, your family, and friends.
- Practical readiness, including your personal and professional affairs, and what to pack.
- Situational preparedness. You should study and understand the operational context in which you will be working.

You may be called to deploy to an emergency at short notice. (Members of UNHCR's internal emergency roster have committed to deploy within 72 hours). You may have little time to prepare yourself and the deployment may abruptly interrupt your daily routine and current work.

An emergency assignment also challenges your wellbeing: The working hours may be long; working conditions may not be ideal; living conditions may be spartan; security may be a concern; your sleep is likely to suffer. You can be effective in such conditions, but you are likely

to manage the stress of your deployment much better if you are well prepared.

Emergency missions can also create anxiety for those around you. Deployments can easily disrupt our relationships with partners, spouses, children and friends. All may have concerns, and it is important to find ways to include them as you prepare to deploy.

2. Main guidance

A) Psychological preparedness

Since 2012, psychological preparation has been offered as a matter of course to all staff assigned to D and E duty stations. It covers potentially a broad range of subjects:

- Personal and family issues;
- Practical and logistical arrangements at home or at base;
- Practical preparations for deployment; Psychological preparation.

When you prepare psychologically, you attune your inner resources to the coming situation. A person who is psychologically prepared expects certain challenges, foresees their impact, understands how he or she will react, is able to identify his or her inner resources, and knows where and how to seek support when needed.

People differ in the degree of preparation they need. Some prepare very thoroughly. Their preparation is planned and detailed. Others are happier to go with the flow. Find what level of preparation suits your personal needs.

Attitude is an important factor and will influence your ability to succeed in the demanding and chaotic environment of an emergency. What qualities are required of members of an emergency team?

- To be professional;
- To be a team player;
- To be flexible and understanding;
- To have a sense of humor!

Create a mental picture. Think about the upcoming deployment and compare it to previous deployments. Develop this into a structured preparation by reflecting on what was helpful to you in similar contexts and what you would have done differently. Ask what aspects of the new deployment are likely to be the most challenging for you, professionally and personally.

This exercise will assist you in recognizing the challenges you may encounter and the resources you can draw on to address and manage them.

Assess your current psychosocial wellbeing. It may be difficult to assess your own state of mind. Nevertheless, try to give yourself some honest feedback on how you have functioned in recent months. Have you slept for enough time and well? What has been your level of energy? What has been your prevailing mood? Have you consumed more alcohol than usual, or other substances? What level of social support have you received from others? Have you been able to support people close to you? Are you running away from anything?

The answers to these questions may help you identify areas to which you should give attention. Talking with a Staff Counsellor can help you recognize these issues faster and set up a plan for addressing them. If the exercise makes you unsure about your deployment, contact a Staff Counsellor for a confidential conversation.

Familiarize yourself with typical stress and trauma reactions. When we experience psychological disturbances and do not understand their cause, it can feel as though our body or mind has let us down. If you are familiar with the neurobiological symptoms of stress and trauma, you will be able to recognize stress reactions faster and will be more likely to address them constructively. (See Entries [Coping with Stress](#) and [Dealing with critical incidents and trauma](#))

Develop your personal indicators of fatigue. Being aware of our stress reactions is a first step towards building resilience. When we are in the middle of a difficult situation, it is hard to step back and decide what we need to do to change our situation. Write down how you feel, think and behave when you are close to the edge or extremely tired. Discuss your list with friends who know you well; ask them to comment on it and add their observations of you.

The 'buddy system'. It has been shown that the support of close friends helps to sustain people who are working in stressful conditions. Ask a few trusted friends or family members to check on you regularly while you are deployed. If possible, discuss how they will 'watch over you' and what warning signs they will look out for. Make use of your personal indicators of fatigue.

Prepare a self-care plan. (See Entry [Coping with Stress](#).) Think about what normally relaxes you (music, books, sport, etc.). Keep such items ready: prepare your kindle and music, food, photographs, exercise equipment (skipping rope, pilates' ball, football). Design a realistic self-care plan that you know you can implement.

Take care of your relationships. An emergency deployment will disrupt your relationships. That does not mean they will dissolve, but you need to pay attention to how they are affected.

Observation suggests that relationships survive best when everyone is involved in preparing for the deployment. This may seem counter-intuitive: you may be tempted to conceal dangerous or ugly aspects of the operation from those you love. In fact, by giving them a role, you help them prepare and they often feel fulfilled by being able to support you. The connection between you can become stronger as you foster inter-reliance. If those close to you become very anxious, contact a Staff Counsellor for advice and support.

Help your children to understand. Today it is harder and harder to keep information away from children. Try to understand how they imagine your world. Help them understand where you will be going, what your responsibilities will be, and how you plan to stay in touch. Be aware that your children may well have heard or read news about the place to which you will deploy.

B) Practical readiness

The underlying principle is that you should not delay your deployment, because the emergency response operation will need you. A few days in a fast-moving operation can make a big difference.

Prepare and adapt to living and working conditions that are oftentimes very challenging but expected for emergencies.

Financial and legal matters. It is important to put your financial, legal and daily affairs in order before you leave. Make necessary payments (rent, telephone, etc.) and financial arrangements, e.g. power of attorney, AETNA Life Insurance or similar, draft a last will. It is unlikely you will have time for those during your emergency deployment.

If you have international debit/credit cards, make sure they are valid. Once you know your location of deployment, ask administrative colleagues on practicalities regarding money withdrawal/advances, so you can plan.

Health. Make necessary routine medical check-ups (dentist, ophthalmologist, etc.). If you take any medicines, make sure you bring them with you for the duration of your mission. Ensure your Periodic Medical Examination (PME) and vaccinations are up to date. Once you know where you are deploying to, obtain a mission medical clearance.

Passport. Make sure your passport (and UNLP if applicable) is at hand and valid for at least 18 months (or for at least six months after the end of your planned mission). The receiving operation will advise you on visa procedures applicable to the country to which you are deploying.

Family and friends. Being away from home for a long mission may have an impact on you, and also on your family and friends. You should keep the people close to you well informed and prepared for your departure. Make necessary arrangements for your family/friends (school, babysitter, housekeeper, etc.). Don't forget about your pets!

Home-security and maintenance: Make arrangements beforehand to ensure adequate

security of your home while you are away on a mission. Ensure that all concerned in your parent duty station are aware of your long absence – the team and colleagues, the guard at your home, etc.

Arrange your backup: Identify and organize backup arrangements for the duration of your mission in your parent duty station to allow for a handover at short notice. This should be discussed with your supervisor(s).

Packing tips:

- Start packing early: do not wait until the last minute;
- Use small and large bags. Depending on security at your mission duty station, you might be required to have an emergency bag ready;
- Shop for camping equipment, clothes, etc.;
- Check the weather and living conditions and bring appropriate clothing/equipment, e.g., raincoat and boots, thermal clothing, sun hat, flip flops, etc. For UNHCR visibility clothing, please check the [UNHCR Shop](#);
- UNHCR staff will always deploy with their laptop and phone received at parent duty station;
- Take an inventory with you in case your bag gets lost;
- If possible, reach out to a colleague already working in the location of your deployment and ask them for quick tips on the practical aspects of everyday life and what is available to buy locally.

Packing ideas for deep field locations:

- Mosquito dome and mosquito repellent;
- Sleeping bag;
- Ear plugs, sleeping mask;
- Water purification bottle with integrated filter;
- Micropur tablets;
- Kitchen utensils (Camp-A-Box), thermos;
- Multi-tool, LED (head) lamp, whistle;

- Sewing kit, waterproof matchbox, compass, fire steel lighter;
- Set of cleaning sponges;
- TSA approved padlock with code;
- Mosquito coils with holder.

C) Situational preparedness

It is important that you familiarize yourself with the operational context you will be working in. If you already have a UNHCR email, you can access the relevant [Emergency Risk & Preparedness Overview](#) (opens in a new tab). Ask the country operation for the relevant Contingency Plans.

In addition, you can consult the [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#), [Intranet](#) and the [Global Focus website](#) to read the latest internal and external updates to familiarize yourself with the operation as much as possible before you arrive. Also visit [ReliefWeb Response](#) (opens in a new tab) for overall UN products and updates from other agencies. Please familiarize yourself with the terms of references for the mission and do as much research as possible ahead of your arrival.

Ask for security and administrative briefings immediately upon arrival and operational briefings relevant to your function by your manager and relevant colleagues. If you have not yet received your terms of reference, ask for them.

Packing tips

- 6 ID size photos
- Passport, UNLP, Vaccination card, blood type card
- Personal Medical Kit, incl. contraception, condoms, tampons and sanitary supplies
- Cash
- Email yourself a copy of the important documents
- Toiletries, sunscreen, sun blocker, lip balm, sun cream, wet wipes, hand sanitizer, etc.

- Thin towel
- Second pair of glasses
- Penknife, string, clothes pegs
- Strong rubber gloves
- Alarm clock/ watch
- Small pocket mirror
- Music and books
- Bin liners to line your suitcase so that clothes stay dry
- Superglue and plastic/ metal hooks
- Treats for you to make yourself feel good, for instance your personal pillow
- Well adapted hat
- Flashlight & batteries/ hand powered battery charger, power bank, adapter, multi-purpose knife
- Earplugs and sleep eye goggles
- First aid kit. Include "Second skin" to cover blisters on your foot (available in

pharmacies)

- Bring dried fruits, biscuits, energy and cereal bars, instant coffee, favorite tea bags, etc.
- Doorstop wedge

3. Learning and field practices

The eLearning module [Emergency deployment - Pre-departure and Arrival](#) is part of the Baseline Package of the Workshop of Emergency Management (WEM) and available to the whole workforce in Workday.

4. Links

[ReliefWeb Response Situations \(unhcr.org\)](#) [Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal - Home \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

5. Main contacts

UNHCR has posted staff counsellors in every region, who are available for psychological preparation. You have access to the list of Staff Counsellors on UNHCR Wellbeing Platform: <https://wellbeing.unhcr.org/my-wellness-team>

If you prefer to discuss your preparation with an external mental health professional, the Psychosocial Wellbeing Section can refer you to one, free of charge for UNHCR staff. If you select your own psychological adviser, you will be expected to pay his or her fee, which will not be reimbursable.

Emergency Handbook Unit in the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS): HQEMHAND@unhcr.org