

Wellbeing tips for Afghan Families arriving in the UK:

Leaving our homeland after war is often very distressing because we must leave behind all that is familiar to us. This will include the loss of people we love, the loss of our society, our community and our cultural connections. However, when we have experienced war, arrival in another country might also provide a huge sense of relief and physical safety.

That initial feeling of relief and safety may last a few days, a few weeks or much longer but there will also be many practical and other challenges to face. For some it might be the language barrier, housing, money/benefits, not being able to find work, settling children into school, managing a budget/bank account, using public transport, and other services such as a family doctor and other forms of healthcare.

All these activities can be time consuming and challenging, because settling into a new life, a new country with a different culture, rules and customs can take time to adjust to. Sometimes this can be confusing and frustrating as we struggle to create a new life for ourselves. It can also be disappointing because it might not be as easy as we had hoped.

As we begin to settle and sort out those practicalities, we may also begin to feel more stressed and anxious because when we begin to feel safe, our minds and thoughts can become more focused on those traumatic experiences we have escaped. Feeling physically safe does not take away all those worries we have about those loved ones left behind, what may be happening in our home country, or all that we have suffered. For some, those feelings of fear may be there all the time even when they are in a place of safety.

So, it is important to try and be as kind as we can to ourselves and think about what we might anticipate and need over the next few weeks and months, as we connect to our sadness and grief about what we have had to cope with.



Below are a few examples of what we might experience:

- It is very common to experience feelings of guilt at leaving loved ones behind, or guilt at feeling safe when others back home are not. When we feel guilty it is difficult to give ourselves permission to enjoy our own sense of safety.
- It is also common to feel disappointment and anger at ourselves and others, that more could have been done to change the situation.
- It is also very common to be highly self-critical of ourselves and ignore what we did do to the best of our ability at the time.
- Sometimes those traumatic experiences can affect our capacity to think and concentrate, affect our emotions, and the way we think about ourselves and the world.
- It is common to experience physical aches and pain in our bodies because of the stress we have experienced. It is also important to remember that when we are anxious or worry, this also causes physical aches and pains such as a headache or an upset stomach.
- Our eating and our sleeping habits may be affected.
- Our relationships with others may be difficult. Some may not want to spend time alone and prefer the company of others.
- For others, noise and groups or crowds of people might feel too much, and they may withdraw, and want to be left alone.

All the things described above are natural responses to very difficult experiences, and it is important not to put a timescale around how long it may take for us to feel differently. Often these reactions will settle and some of the tips below can be helpful in managing these.

Wellbeing Tips:

1. Try and plan a routine for your day, it can help the hours pass – so try and have a routine for yourself and the family, planning time outside of your accommodation even if for short periods.
2. Try and keep regular mealtimes as part of that routine.
3. Try and maintain regular sleeping arrangements – getting up and going to bed at regular times. Try not to drink too much tea or coffee before bedtime.
4. Making contact with other families locally who have found themselves in a similar situation may also be helpful, as well as linking up with other community/religious groups with similar or familiar culture and language.
5. Understandably we want to keep up with the latest news from home but try and limit the amount of time spent watching the news/social media, such as Facebook, because this can cause more distress and leave us feeling very anxious and helpless. If watching the news, try and limit this to news channels that can be trusted to once or twice per day. Try not to do this in the evening before bedtime.
6. If possible, find some useful ways to physically exercise, try and find out where the nearest parks or safe open spaces are.



All the above can be helpful but we might need additional support if:

- We are feeling unable to manage anxious feelings, that make us feel dizzy, feel sick, difficulty breathing, headaches, heart racing, dry mouth, continuous aches and pains.
- Traumatic experiences can affect our sleep in many ways, such as trouble getting to sleep, waking often or waking up earlier in the morning than is usual. Sleep and rest are important, and if we don't get sufficient sleep this can cause poor concentration, low energy, irritability, frustration and we may need some help with our sleeping habits again.
- After traumatic experiences we sometimes experience bad dreams and nightmares, and if these are frequent, and always the same and wake us up from sleep, it will be helpful to seek support.
- Certain sights and sounds can sometimes remind us of those bad experiences – such as someone shouting or people shouting, seeing things on the TV or on social media, so wherever we are and whatever we are doing, those thoughts can make us feel as if we are back in that frightening situation again, even if only for a short while.
- All of the above can also affect our appetites so we don't enjoy our food, cannot face a meal and start to lose weight.
- Sometimes we can feel that the hardships we have endured are too many, and that we have reached a point where the struggle to keep going is too much and that life is not worth living.



All these feelings and reactions are natural and understandable because of what has been experienced before coming to the UK. If any of the above apply, confiding in someone can make us feel that we are alone. The above is also applicable to loved ones who have travelled to the UK with us, including our partners and our children. Seeking help from a professional, anyone connected to our care, such as a doctor, can advise what support might be most useful, and this can go some way towards managing those traumatic experiences in a less distressing way.

Where can I get help?

If you are worried about your health call the National Health Service on **111**

If you are feeling very distressed call The Samaritans **116 123** or email jo@samaritans.org

For other support you can contact:

British Red Cross helpline number **0808 196 3651**

Refugee Council **0808 196 7272**