



United Nations

EBOLA RESPONSE:
AN OPPORTUNITY TO
ENHANCE FAMILY RESILIENCE

UN Staff Counsellor's Office
November 2014

The **Staff Counsellor's Office** is here to support you at any time.

We can provide confidential consultations over the phone from anywhere, or in-person in New York.

You can reach us at scohq@un.org or +1 (212) 963-7044

For more information about the Ebola virus or if you have any medical questions, please contact **Medical Services Division** at +1 (212) 963-7090 or +1 (212) 963-7082.

For information related to emergency preparedness, please contact the **Emergency Preparedness and Support Team** (EPST) at +1 (212) 963-4220, via email at epst@un.org.

Ebola Response: Family Factsheet

As a family member of someone who is working as part of the United Nations' Ebola response team, you have a right to feel proud! Ebola experts agree that the UN's effort to combat the virus at its source in West Africa is absolutely crucial humanitarian work, and it takes a special kind of person to give themselves to this medical emergency. People all over the world have expressed appreciation and support for these efforts.

Sharing in this noble mission can be difficult for the family. **The main challenge for UN families is not in coping with the actual virus, but coping with anxieties and fears about the virus** (including the unfortunate social stigma still associated with it). A certain level of family concern is natural and normal, of course. But too much worry can cause problems for family members, and ultimately is not helpful for anybody.

It's very important to keep your fears in perspective. This is especially difficult to do if everyone - friends, family, TV news - seems to have an opinion about Ebola. Fear is very contagious - this remains true no matter how realistic or unrealistic those fears may be.

We here at UN Medical Services want to remind UN families, **whenever anxieties are heightened, to try to bring your focus back to the medical science.** Learning to differentiate rational fears from irrational fears will help you cope with your concerns throughout the process.

A few things to keep in mind:

Ebola virus is not easily transmissible. Person-to-person transmission requires direct contact with someone who is not only infected but who also shows active symptoms. **A person who has never had any symptoms cannot transmit Ebola virus.** And when a patient is receiving care, effective medical systems, like those currently being put in place by the UN, are able to reduce transmission of Ebola to near zero.

To add some perspective, compare the Ebola virus to the influenza virus. In contrast to Ebola, the influenza virus (the flu) is airborne and easily transmissible. Compared to Ebola, influenza

infects many more people and takes many more victims overall. But Ebola *feels* scarier for many of us. There are multiple reasons for this, including natural human fear of the unfamiliar, exposure to other people’s anxieties, and misinformation and scare-mongering in much of the mass media coverage.

Medical fact: A person who does not have symptoms cannot transmit the Ebola virus

Fear of Ebola can affect very healthy people, can cause irrational behavior, and can reduce well-being. This fear has quickly become a bigger social problem than the actual medical dangers of Ebola. It is also more contagious than the virus itself (fear can even be transmitted through the TV).

Misconception	Fact
“I heard it’s very easy to catch Ebola.”	The Ebola virus can only be transmitted person-to-person through close and direct physical contact with infected bodily fluids. http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/ebola/06-october-2014/en/
“I heard Ebola is an airborne virus, or might one day become airborne.”	Ebola is not an airborne virus and there is no evidence to suggest that it will ever become airborne. http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/ebola/06-october-2014/en/
“I heard there is no treatment for Ebola.”	Infected patients who are diagnosed early and receive aggressive supportive care such as fluid resuscitation have a very high likelihood of survival. http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/treatment/

Before departure:

- Keep things in perspective. For any medical questions about Ebola, contact the UN Medical Services. We are here to help.
- Be proactive and responsible in dealing with anxiety—take concrete actions that will help reduce uncertainty and keep you and your family calm.
- Remember that every UN staff member who is going to be deployed to West Africa will receive a detailed and expert briefing as part of their medical clearance, as well as any necessary equipment they will need for self-protection (if they are working directly with patients, for example).
- Offer emotional support for your family member while being careful not to let your natural and realistic concerns turn into out-of-perspective worries.

While your family member is away:

- Remember that person-to-person transmission of Ebola virus is very unlikely when medical protocol is followed. With effective health systems, it is very difficult for the virus to spread; these are the health systems the UN is putting in place.
- Get your facts about Ebola from a reliable source (e.g. World Health Organization, UN Medical Services). 24-hour television news is generally not a good source of information.
- Educating yourself about Ebola can help reduce unnecessary fear. And yet sometimes distraction is the best option for reducing anxiety—if you're extremely worried about Ebola, try avoiding information about Ebola for a period of time and do something totally unrelated.

After coming home:

- Border control protocols put in place by host governments (e.g. New York State) must be respected, and quarantines may be legally necessary even in the absence of any symptoms. Your family will have to adapt to these conditions. But remember to keep in mind that politics and medicine don't always come to the same conclusions. Again, **a person who has never had any symptoms cannot transmit the Ebola virus.**

Tips for Taking Care of Children:

- The departure of a parent to take a job in another duty station can create insecurity and fears in children, and how they react will depend on their age and developmental stage.
- Remember that family and other caregivers are key sources of emotional support for children, and even though children are resilient, they also cope better when they have around them adults that are calm and stable.
- They also might have heard a lot about Ebola in the media or at school, and they might get very worried that their caregiver is going to West Africa. Try to address their concerns with the right amount of information, and in a language that they can understand.
- If their age is adequate to understand, explain to them that they should be proud that their caregiver will be part of the humanitarian efforts to support the Ebola-affected areas.
- Depending on their age, try to involve them in some of the preparation activities prior to the departure to the new mission. For example, you can all look together at the world map, to see where mum/ dad will be now working.
- Try to encourage their communication with the caregiver who is leaving, since relationships with children need constant nurturing.
- When faced with stress, children might have similar reactions as adults, but they might also show some specific distress reactions, like returning to earlier behaviours (e.g. bedwetting) or being clingier with adults than they usually are. Many of these behaviours can be normal efforts to adapt, and they often disappear over time. Try to be patient.
- Validate and normalize children's feelings and concerns, and try to be understanding, sympathetic, and patient. Give the child time to adjust to the new situation.

- As much as possible, try to maintain regular routines/ structure.
- If you notice behaviours that are different from the child's normal presentation, and they impair daily functioning, you might consider seeking advice from a doctor or a mental health professional.

REMEMBER THAT CHILDREN ARE RESILIENT AND THEY HAVE THEIR OWN RESOURCES FOR COPING. YOU CAN HELP THEM BY LISTENING TO THEIR CONCERNS AND GIVING THEM ACCURATE INFORMATION.