

NEWS

## Guide: Managing anxiety and mental health in the UAE during regional tensions, according to experts

Psychologists outline common stress reactions during emergency alerts and regional tensions, and where residents in the UAE can access free mental health support if needed

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Amid Iran crisis, mental health professionals say the objective is not to eliminate anxiety altogether, but to regulate it before short-term stress becomes longer-term distress. Image: Shutterstock

Mental health professionals say the objective is not to eliminate anxiety altogether, but to regulate it before short-term stress becomes longer-term distress.

## Free mental health support in the UAE

Residents in the UAE have access to several government-backed mental health support lines:

- **800-HOPE (800-4673):** The National Mental Support Line, available from 8am to 8pm. Residents can also send a message via WhatsApp.
- **800 46342:** Indian Workers Resources Centre (IWRC), open to residents of all nationalities.
- **8001717:** Estijaba helpline in Abu Dhabi, operated by Seha, providing psychological support over the phone.

Emergency services remain available nationwide:

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- **999** – Police
- **998** – Ambulance
- **997** – Fire or civil defence

Immediate help should be sought if there are thoughts of self-harm or feeling unsafe.

Authorities have also emphasised that residents should rely only on official and verified sources for updates and avoid circulating unconfirmed information.

Gerber, Founder of Paracelsus Recovery. “It is the nervous system’s alarm system, designed to detect danger long before the thinking mind has time to assess what is actually happening.”

He said the nervous system does not clearly distinguish between direct physical danger and disruption to routine. “To the nervous system, a predator and a piercing emergency tone can feel identical.”

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Dr Jane Halsall said the most common stress reactions during periods of geopolitical conflict include “hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, irritability, and intrusive ‘what if’ thinking.” People may find themselves repeatedly checking news updates or feeling a loss of control.

Physiologically, she said, the body increases stress hormones such as cortisol and activates the fight-or-flight response. “Uncertainty alone can be sufficient to trigger anxiety as the mind attempts to process the potential threat.”

Gerber added that airspace closures and movement restrictions can awaken “a very primal fear of being trapped,” even among residents who are not travelling. He also pointed to

## What stress looks like

Common symptoms reported in the first 24 to 48 hours include:

- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability
- Increased heart rate
- Nausea or dizziness
- Catastrophic thinking

Gerber said people respond differently. Some seek reassurance or spend more time with family. Others may stockpile supplies or consider leaving the region. “These are all attempts by the nervous system to restore a sense of safety and control,” he said.

## Three immediate steps to regulate anxiety

Halsall advises regulating the body first. Slow breathing — inhaling for four seconds and exhaling for six — can calm the nervous system.

She also recommends returning to routine. “Structure restores a sense of control.” Small predictable actions such as meals, exercise and school runs help stabilise mood.

Cognitively, she said residents should focus on what they can control and avoid ruminating on “what if” thoughts that can lead to spiralling anxiety.

Gerber suggests converting vague fear into practical planning. Writing down feared scenarios and listing possible responses can restore a sense of agency. “When we do this, we move from vague dread to practical thinking,” he said.

If panic begins to rise, Halsall advises slowing the breath and grounding attention by naming five things you can see and hear. “Panic escalates when we interpret sensations as dangerous. Calm interpretation reduces escalation.”

Gerber recommends a similar method: “Breathe in for five, hold for five, and breathe out for five,” then name five things you can see, hear and smell to reorient the nervous system.

## Managing news consumption

a day is generally healthier than continuous scrolling.

“The aim is to stay informed and not immersed.”

Gerber recommends paying attention to physical cues while consuming news. If scrolling leads to racing thoughts or physical tension, stepping away is a form of self-regulation, not avoidance.

## Supporting children

Children are highly sensitive to adult emotional states.

“If a parent appears highly anxious, children will absorb that anxiety,” Halsall said.

Maintaining routine, offering simple age-appropriate explanations and avoiding exposure to graphic media are recommended. Younger children may show anxiety through irritability, sleep disturbances or clinginess. In teenagers, withdrawal, aggression or signs of self-harm require attention.

Gerber emphasised caregiver presence as protective. “An attentive, emotionally available parent is the most powerful protective factor in a child’s life.”

## When stress becomes more serious

Situational anxiety becomes more concerning if it persists or interferes with daily functioning.

Warning signs include persistent sleep disturbance, significant mood changes, withdrawal from usual activities, recurring panic attacks, intrusive memories or suicidal thoughts.

Halsall said further support may be needed if symptoms last beyond a few weeks or impair daily functioning.

Gerber advised seeking professional help if anxiety “persists well beyond the immediate event, intensifies rather than eases, or starts interfering with daily life, sleep, work, or relationships.”

Mental health professionals stress that anxiety during periods of regional escalation is a biological response. Regulation, routine, controlled information intake and early support are the most effective ways to prevent short-term stress from becoming chronic distress.