

## Coping with Feelings of Isolation and Alienation in Times of International Conflict

In times of international tension and armed conflict, people sometimes have a tendency to hold ordinary people to blame for the actions of their governments. National emotions and anger become personal. When you are on the receiving end of that blame and hostility, the experience can be painful. People you consider friends may no longer talk to you. Coworkers may avoid you or treat you with coldness.

These tendencies are deeply rooted in human nature, and the problems they create can't easily be "solved" the way some personal challenges can be. However, there are some steps you can take to help yourself feel less isolated and give yourself the strength to carry on.

### Put things in perspective.

When personal conflicts arise, it can be helpful to try to see things through the other person's eyes and understand the context of the behavior. That's not to excuse rude or inappropriate behavior, and certainly not hostile words or actions, but putting things in perspective can help you choose your response.

When a nation's government or its leaders act in ways that cause harm or are perceived to cause harm, it's natural for the people offended or hurt by those actions to assign blame to the people of that country.

If you agree with your government's actions, understand that others can have different opinions. Understand, too, that people may be responding to different information. What you see, hear, and read about the situation may be very different from what others see, hear, and read.

If you disagree with your government's actions, understand that people outside your country may hold you responsible for enabling your government to have and hold power. It's true that the people of a country bear some responsibility for the government that leads them. They generally have more of a role to play in determining who their leaders are than people outside the country. However, it's not true that every person in a country supports all of their government's actions.

People outside of your country may not recognize other factors that may be at play—the political situation, for example, or restrictions on protests or freedom of expression. Some governments gain or hold power by force, not popularity. In some countries, the opportunity to express opposing views—or even access them—is limited or comes with great personal risk. If you are from a country where freedom of expression is restricted, you know this. Accept that others may not understand your reality. Try not to blame them for their lack of understanding or react with your own hostility to their words or behavior.

### Recognize and accept your emotional reactions.

If you are feeling isolated and alienated as a consequence of world events, it can be helpful to recognize and accept your emotions:

- It's natural to feel hurt when friends snub or reject you. The drive to belong and be part of a community is one of the most basic human urges. Exclusion from a community is one of the oldest forms of punishment.

- If you do not support your government's actions, it's natural to feel guilty about harms they may be causing. Your government is supposed to be expressing the will of its people, and you are one of those people.
- It's natural to feel angry at the unfairness of your situation.
- Other emotional reactions can include anxiety, fear, sorrow, grief, and apathy or emotional numbness.

Experiencing these and other powerful emotions is an indication of your humanity, not a sign that something is wrong with you.

Recognize your emotions for what they are: natural reactions to a terrible situation. Accept them, as uncomfortable as they may be. Understand, too, that it can take time to process strong emotions.

### Choose your response.

You can't control the actions of other people. You can't control world events. You may not be able to control how you feel in reaction to those actions and events, but it's important to remember that you *can* choose your response.

### Connect with the people who are available to you.

Human connection is necessary to emotional health. Supportive friends help you through down times and give you a lift when you need it. Connections with others are also important in solving problems and understanding reality. Friends and family share practical information. They can challenge you when your thinking is distorted or unrealistic.

If you are temporarily cut off from some people in your social network, strengthen the connections that remain. Reach out to the people who are available to you. Those might be neighbors and local friends. They might be supportive members of your family. They might be coworkers with whom you are still in communication. They might be others who share your situation and with whom you can connect on social media.

Be careful, of course, if communication is monitored and the expression of certain views is dangerous. Where that is a risk, use your communication for emotional and practical support that won't draw unwanted attention.

### Take care of yourself.

Eat regular meals with a mix of nutritious foods. Get outside for walks or physical activity. Get the sleep you need. Make time for activities you enjoy. The more you focus on the things that bring you joy, the more you can train your brain to feel more optimistic and resilient in the face of adversity.

Use mindfulness and other grounding exercises to help stay calm. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment, setting aside distractions and thoughts of the past or future. By focusing on your breathing, an object, or a present feeling, you can let go of regrets about the past and worries about the future and accept your current reality.

### Remind yourself of what's good about your country and culture.

You may feel that it's not just you who is being rejected and criticized, but your country and your culture. If you do not support your government's actions, you may feel that you've lost pride in your national or cultural

identity. That can add to your sense of loss. Expressing that pride to international friends right now can be read as defensive or even hostile, especially to those who have been hurt by your government's actions. However, reminding yourself of the positive aspects of your heritage can help you weather this difficult time.

### Do what you can to make the situation better.

Feelings of isolation and helplessness can be overcome by taking even small actions. Help someone who is in need. Be kind to the people around you. Cook a meal for someone. Explain the value of international communication at a person-to-person level. Offer your services as an aide, a translator, or using another skill. Look for opportunities to influence your country's actions.

### Seek help.

It's not a sign of weakness to seek professional help when you are in emotional pain or facing extraordinary challenges. It's a sign of strength and a gift to the people who care about and depend on you. Professional counseling can provide a safe space to share your feelings, talk about your experiences, and learn new ways to cope.

Morgan, H. (2022, March 16). *Coping with feelings of isolation and alienation in times of international conflict* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.