

The following 10 tips draw upon decades of experience from the Dart Centre Asia Pacific team, especially those who have deployed to conflict, war, and disaster-ravaged zones around the world. These tips are intended to be general in nature. There may be instances where specific professional advice is required.



PREPARING FOR ASSIGNMENTS IN UNSTABLE AND UNPREDICTABLE ENVIRONMENTS: TEN TIPS FROM DART CENTRE ASIA PACIFIC

1. DO YOUR RESEARCH

Make sure you know as much as possible about the location of the assignment before you arrive. This includes understanding the local culture, customs and language. Also make sure you have packed appropriate clothing for local cultural norms and climate. Familiarise yourself with detailed maps of the areas you will visit. Identify places where you may take emergency sanctuary – e.g., churches, mosques, hospitals – should things take a sudden, dangerous turn.

It is vital to be aware of the current political and safety climates as well as any specific risks involved. A good resource to begin with is the [CIA World fact book](https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook) (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook>) which profiles every nation in the world. In Australia, the federal government's [SmartTraveller website](https://www.smarttraveller.gov.au/destinations) (<https://www.smarttraveller.gov.au/destinations>) rates every country's current safety level.

If available to you, be sure to consult with in-house or industry safety and security experts before heading into a known conflict zone.

Well ahead of time, consider any diseases that may be prevalent where you may travel – e.g., [malaria is endemic in many countries](https://www.cdc.gov/malaria/about/distribution.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/malaria/about/distribution.html>), so you would need to

take preventative medication ahead of time as well as during your travel – and you will need to have relevant vaccinations up to date.

In Australia, the [Travel Doctor](https://www.traveldoctor.com.au) (<https://www.traveldoctor.com.au>) is a good resource for both current health alerts and vaccinations required. It also lists GP clinics that specialise in this field.

PRO TIP: *Ensure any medications you carry with you are legal in the countries to which you are travelling. You can check whether there are any restrictions or quantity limits on prescription or over-the-counter drugs by contacting the [embassy, high commission or consulate](https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/foreign-embassies/foreign-embassies-and-consulates-in-australia) (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/foreign-embassies/foreign-embassies-and-consulates-in-australia>) for any country that you will be travelling to. Even various headache medications are outlawed in some countries, so don't skip this step. If you expect to take prescription medicines, download a [Medicine Export Declaration Form](#) and have your doctor fill that out, saying what the drugs are for, and carry that document with you at all times. If you find a drug you require is banned, ask your doctor if equivalent drugs might be available.*

2. HAVE NO EXPECTATIONS

Especially in conflict zones and in the aftermath of natural disasters, do not assume there will be running water, electricity, telephones, lights, shops or pharmacies that will be open. You will need to carry all personal medications as well as a decent first aid kit. Water quality is often an issue in disaster and conflict zones. A helpful item to always have at hand is a battery-operated, portable water purifier, such as a [SteriPEN](https://youtu.be/tLiUUlcmYYQ) (<https://youtu.be/tLiUUlcmYYQ>), which uses UV light to kill bacteria, protozoa and viruses within a couple of minutes. Staying hydrated, even in a cold climate, will enable you to focus on your work.

If you know access to power is likely to be an issue, beyond simply depending on a power bank to charge your phone or tablet for a couple of days, you may want to invest in a [portable solar power panel array](https://youtu.be/HckH4TwW_yU) (https://youtu.be/HckH4TwW_yU). There are many on the market. This [particular one](https://www.amazon.com/BigBlue-Foldable-Waterproof-SunPower-Cellphones/dp/B01EXWCPLC/?tag=travellersworldwide-20&th=1) (<https://www.amazon.com/BigBlue-Foldable-Waterproof-SunPower-Cellphones/dp/B01EXWCPLC/?tag=travellersworldwide-20&th=1>) is compact, lightweight and retails for around \$US100. But there are others on the market.

Remember, if you prepare for a worst-case scenario, you will encounter fewer problems.

PRO TIP: *Women should carry their own supply of personal hygiene products and not expect to be able to access these. In conflict and disaster areas especially, shops are usually closed and, if not, there is no guarantee there will be stock on the shelves.*

3. HAVE DOCUMENTATION READY

Keep copies handy of any documents provided by your employer or the media organisation for which you are freelancing, along with any accompanying letter or government documents supporting your reasons for being in the country/conflict zone/disaster locations. You may need to present these to officials as you move about. A list of who to contact in an emergency is also wise.

Also consider carrying a document prepared by a solicitor outlining instructions to your employer, family and your government in the event of your death or serious injury. Have a last will and testament drawn up. It should include instructions on what you want done if you are injured, taken hostage or killed overseas. For example, do you wish to be medically evacuated to your home country if too badly injured to voice your preference, or are you happy to be treated in the country you are visiting?

Consider having life insurance as well as income protection insurance, should you be rendered out of action for a significant period.

Electronic ID cards or passports for identification purposes are essential when encountering police or military forces (e.g., if you are detained). Documenting your identity is key so that you are not denied basic rights while on assignment.

Make sure you have all necessary travel documents (e.g., passport, visa, vaccination records, etc.) within easy access at all times. It is also a good idea to have an electronic copy of these on your phone and to email yourself and a family member or friend copies of these should they be required.

PRO TIP: *Keep your passport, visa, cards and any essential documents, as well as cash, in a [money belt](#) that you can wear under your outer clothing while you are away. Keeping your passport, documents and cash in separate, ziplock bags will keep them dry in case it rains or you end up in the water.*

4. STAY SAFE WHILE IN TRANSIT

When travelling for an assignment, suitcases, backpacks and other work-related items can make you a visible target. Pack as light as you can and keep essential items safely on your person.

Your suitcase should be sturdy, not too heavy, of plain colour (bright colours can make you a more noticeable target) and lockable.

Keep any clothing that advertises your media role, such as a media or press vest – as well as any expensive reporting equipment, including your laptop – in your locked suitcase when you are not actively wearing or using it.

Keep clothing lightweight and functional, preferably made of cotton. Avoid synthetic clothing wherever possible as it is flammable. If it will be cold, be sure to pack extra-warm underclothes, a woollen jumper and a waterproof jacket if possible.

PRO TIP: *An outfit with plenty of pockets – such as cargo pants teamed with a photographer’s vest or fishing vest – can be especially useful, both in transit and when working in the field. You can stash essential reporting accoutrements – such as pens, notebooks, cords, power banks, sunscreen, insect repellent, Swiss army knife, tissues and snacks – into their pockets.*

5. BE AWARE OF YOUR ENVIRONMENT

While journalists and media workers should be prepared for any possible situation, the weather conditions can greatly influence what you need to take with you.

In hot or humid climates, it is essential to wear sunscreen and mosquito repellent. In humid climates, it is helpful to have silicone sachets in with your equipment when in its case.

If working or travelling where you may encounter heavy rain or snowstorms, be sure to pack rain-proof – and wind-proof – wet-weather gear as well as warm clothing that you can layer.

Extra consideration needs to be made if you will be sleeping outdoors. If wet weather is predicted, have waterproof bags to protect equipment such as camera, microphones and notepads from being damaged. Should you find yourself in the midst of unrest or riots, figure out where your closest safe exit is at all times and know how to respond to all possible outcomes, including being exposed to [riot control agents](https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/riotcontrol/factsheet.asp) (<https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/riotcontrol/factsheet.asp>).

It is also important to be mindful of language. In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for years for a single offending word or photo. Jailing or killing a journalist removes a vital witness to events and threatens press freedom.

PRO TIP: *Gather as much information about the environment you will be in as possible. Talk to researchers, humanitarian workers and military personnel familiar with the area. Contact local news organisations and colleagues who are already there or who have recently returned. Ask experienced journalists how they would approach the assignment. Find a local fixer and a driver and plan where you are going to stay.*

6. PHYSICAL SAFETY

Foreigners are often targeted for money or for political reasons. Avoid wearing jewellery or clothing that could attract attention.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) may include things such as helmets, face shields and ballistic vests. Make sure your equipment is up to date by checking its manufacturer's guidelines or using a third-party verification service.

PPE can help protect media workers from injuries caused by shrapnel, gunfire or violence. Some conflict areas confiscate PPE at the border upon entry. Having accompanying documentation from your media organisation should assist with this, but be prepared that this could happen and know where you may be able to replenish essential items.

PRO TIP: *The [Safety Guide for Journalists](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/2015-rsf-safety-guide-for-journalists.pdf) (<https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/2015-rsf-safety-guide-for-journalists.pdf>) prepared by Reporters Without Borders provides guidelines and practical advice for those who risk running into an enemy of press freedom on a street corner or on a deserted road.*

7. DIGITAL SAFETY

Apart from service outages and batteries on smartphones needing recharging with power banks, there are genuine concerns about how individuals may be tracked or traced by their telecommunications activities. This may even cost people their lives.

A regularly updated resource is the [Committee to Protect Journalists' Digital Safety Kit](https://cpj.org/2019/07/digital-safety-kit-journalists) (<https://cpj.org/2019/07/digital-safety-kit-journalists>). It shows how to protect your accounts, avoid falling into phishing traps, securing your devices, using encrypted messaging and secure internet practice as well as any cyber risks to be aware of when crossing borders.

PRO TIP: *If you are heading to a sensitive location, deactivate your social media and change settings on devices – including smart watches – so that your location cannot be detected. Save posting images until you return home. Communicate with colleagues and your home base via secure applications, such as Signal or WhatsApp. Try to use local phone cards so as not to draw attention to foreign numbers being used in the area. Before you leave for an assignment, ensure you set a fixed time for checking-in with your manager as well as agreeing a couple of phrases that will indicate you are safe or need to be extracted ASAP.*

8. WELLBEING

While covering assignments in challenging environments you may be directly or vicariously exposed to trauma or experience moral injury.

Protect your wellbeing by having a self-care plan that you follow while on assignment. Identify a colleague or someone you can talk to for peer support while you are on assignment and after you return home. Don't be afraid to ask your newsroom manager to be rotated out of long-term coverage so that you can rest and recover.

Most importantly, pace yourself. Resist the urge to stick with the story around the clock without breaks. This can endanger both your physical and mental health.

PRO TIPS: *Avoid stimulants such as alcohol while on assignment. Try to get a good night's sleep or at least several short naps if difficult conditions will allow that. Take a melatonin tablet to assist with sleep. Rather than drink coffee – which will spike your adrenaline and give you a short-term boost of energy and physical strength followed by a crash leading to fatigue and irritability – opt to drink water or natural or herbal teas you bring with you and made with water from a trusted, clean source. Consider taking daily exercise in a confined space if you are unable to go out safely for a walk or run.*

9. WHAT TO PACK

Always be prepared to leave a location in a hurry. You may even need to leave most of your belongings behind. In addition to always wearing your money belt, keeping your phone on your person, and stashing your pockets with essential reporting tools, ensure any day pack you carry has items that will sustain you for 24 hours.

The items you should have in your day pack include:

- a head torch with fresh batteries
- medication to last 2-3 days
- your water purifier
- some protein bars in case you get stranded without food
- a proper mask to protect you from dust, smells, and airborne viruses
- a scarf made of tightly woven cotton to cover your face in case you are exposed to chemicals, pepper spray or tear gas.

Pack so that, even without power or lights, you can quickly find items in your pack.

PRO TIP: *Purchase a day pack that is made of durable fabric that can't be slashed, especially the straps, while you are wearing it on your shoulder or on your back. If it also has a waist strap, that will make it extra hard to quickly remove from your person. Ensure it has a decent place for your water bottle, preferably inside, to prevent contamination in the open air.*

10. COMING HOME

It can be difficult coming home and returning to “normal” after bearing witness to tragedy and suffering.

Reactions to trauma will differ from person to person and may be more acute if previous traumatic stress has been experienced. It is important to monitor any disruptive symptoms and note the length of time they have been apparent.

Media organisations are increasingly providing staff with confidential access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) where trauma-informed counsellors should be able to help you work through any post-assignment concerns and, if necessary, refer you to more specialised assistance.

Some newsrooms also have peer support programs where trauma-informed peers may provide guidance and support.

If you would prefer to seek professional help independently, look for a mental health professional in your location who specialises in treating people who have been exposed trauma.

PRO TIP: *Many experienced media workers who have covered multiple traumatic stories opt to spend a few days “decompressing” away from the original site but before they return home, to “readjust” to a more normal environment. As media workers return from a challenging assignment, a thoughtful workplace will offer a non-mandatory debriefing for everyone on the team who covered a story that, in an ideal world, no one should have to tell.*

