



Navigating Uncertainty: The Emotional Toll of Fear in Federal Workplaces

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In an era of economic instability, government shutdown threats, and shifting policies, federal employees and contractors face an unparalleled level of uncertainty. Unlike other industries, where layoffs or policy changes might be expected, federal workers are often left in limbo; waiting for decisions that directly impact their livelihoods but remain outside their control.

The stress of “not knowing” is more than a professional inconvenience; it takes a profound psychological toll. The anxiety of waiting to see if a budget passes, if contracts will be renewed, or if paychecks will arrive on time is a uniquely exhausting experience. It creates a state of hypervigilance, forcing workers into survival mode, where fear dictates daily life.

Fear, Stress, and the Emotional Burden

Fear is not just an abstract concept. It is a physiological and emotional response. When uncertainty lingers, the body’s stress response stays activated, leading to chronic anxiety, irritability, fatigue, and even symptoms of depression. Federal workers often report trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and a sense of powerlessness, all of which impact both work performance and personal well-being.

For federal contractors, the uncertainty is compounded. Many do not receive back pay after a shutdown, making financial instability a very real threat. The weight of providing for a family, paying rent, or maintaining health insurance becomes overwhelming when the next paycheck is unknown. This fear extends beyond individual workers, affecting entire families, communities, and local economies.

The Emotional Cost of Being ‘Essential’ or ‘Non-Essential’

The classification of “essential” and “non-essential” workers creates an additional emotional divide. Those deemed “non-essential” may struggle with feelings of worthlessness, questioning their value to



the system. Meanwhile, “essential” workers must report to work, often unpaid, dealing with increased demands, uncertainty, and public scrutiny. Both groups suffer—one from feeling disposable, the other from being overburdened.

Managing Stress in Uncertain Times

While uncertainty is unavoidable in federal work, managing stress and anxiety is possible. Here are some strategies that can help:

1. **Acknowledge Your Feelings** – Recognizing and validating your emotions is the first step in managing stress. It’s okay to feel anxious, frustrated, or exhausted.
2. **Focus on What You Can Control** – While government decisions may be out of your hands, your daily routines, self-care habits, and financial planning are within your power.
3. **Limit News Consumption** – Staying informed is important, but constant exposure to political and economic uncertainty can increase stress. Set boundaries around news and social media consumption.
4. **Seek Support** – Connecting with others who understand your experience can help ease feelings of isolation. Free support groups, like the one I host for federal employees and contractors, provide a space to share, learn, and cope together.
5. **Prioritize Mental and Physical Well-Being** – Exercise, mindfulness practices, and healthy eating can help reduce stress levels. Small, consistent habits make a big difference.
6. **Prepare Financially** – Even small steps toward financial planning can reduce anxiety. Having an emergency fund, talking to a financial advisor, or creating a budget for uncertain times can provide a sense of security.
7. **Consider Professional Help** – If stress becomes overwhelming, therapy/counseling can provide coping strategies tailored to your needs.

You’re Not Alone

Federal employees and contractors serve an essential role in our nation’s infrastructure, yet their well-being is often overlooked. If you are struggling with the emotional impact of uncertainty, know



that you are not alone. My free support group provides a safe space for federal workers to share their experiences, gain support, and develop strategies for coping.

For more information about joining the support group, please contact info@tamiabarnes.com
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By fostering resilience and community, we can navigate these uncertain times together.