

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 many other industries—where layoffs or organizational changes may 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 can take a profound psychological toll. The anxiety of waiting to see whether a budget will pass, contracts will be renewed, or paychecks will arrive on time creates a uniquely exhausting experience. It can lead to a constant state of hypervigilance, pushing workers into survival mode, where fear begins to shape daily life.

Fear, Stress, and the Emotional Burden

Fear is not just an abstract concept—it is a physiological and emotional response. When uncertainty persists, the body's stress response can remain activated for extended periods, leading to chronic anxiety, irritability, fatigue, and even symptoms of depression.

Federal workers often report:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Trouble concentrating
- Increased irritability
- Feelings of powerlessness

These challenges can impact both work performance and overall well-being.

For federal contractors, the uncertainty can be even more difficult. Many contractors do not receive back pay after a government shutdown, making financial instability a very real concern. The pressure of providing for a family, paying rent or a mortgage, and maintaining health insurance can become overwhelming when the next paycheck is uncertain.

This stress does not affect individuals alone—it extends to families, communities, and local economies that rely on federal employment.

The Emotional Cost of Being “Essential” or “Non-Essential”

The classification of workers as “essential” or “non-essential” can create an additional emotional burden.

Those labeled non-essential may struggle with feelings of being undervalued or invisible within the system. Meanwhile, essential workers are often required to continue reporting to work—sometimes without pay—while managing increased demands, uncertainty, and public scrutiny.

Both groups face emotional strain. One may feel disposable, while the other may feel overburdened and unsupported.

Managing Stress During Uncertain Times

While uncertainty is often unavoidable in federal work environments, there are ways to manage the stress and emotional impact that come with it.

1. Acknowledge Your Feelings

Recognizing and validating your emotions is an important first step. It is normal to feel anxious, frustrated, or overwhelmed during times of uncertainty.

2. Focus on What You Can Control

While government decisions may be outside your control, your daily routines, self-care practices, and financial planning are areas where you can take action.

3. Limit News Consumption

Staying informed is important, but constant exposure to political and economic uncertainty can increase stress. Consider setting healthy boundaries around news and social media.

4. Seek Support

Connecting with others who understand your experience can reduce feelings of isolation. Support groups provide a safe space to share experiences and learn coping strategies.

5. Prioritize Mental and Physical Well-Being

Regular exercise, mindfulness practices, and healthy routines can significantly reduce stress and improve emotional resilience.

6. Prepare Financially When Possible

Even small steps toward financial planning—such as building an emergency fund, creating a budget, or consulting a financial advisor—can help create a sense of stability during uncertain times.

7. Consider Professional Support

If stress becomes overwhelming, therapy or counseling can provide tools and strategies to help you navigate uncertainty more effectively.

You're Not Alone

Federal employees and contractors play a vital role in supporting our nation's infrastructure, yet their emotional well-being is often overlooked.

If you are struggling with the stress and uncertainty of federal work, please know that you are not alone. I offer a complimentary support group for federal employees and contractors that provides a safe and confidential space to share experiences, receive support, and learn practical coping strategies.

For more information about joining the support group, please contact:

info@tamiabarnes.com

You can also learn more at:

www.tamiabarnestomasek.com

By fostering resilience, connection, and community, we can navigate these uncertain times together.