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Elena Manina, Chief of the Staff Counselling and Welfare Unit,
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Elena Manina joined the UN System as a UN Volunteer in 2007, and went on to serve in two UN Peacekeeping missions over a period of six years.

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Former UN Volunteer Staff Counsellor: I will always be a volunteer at heart

Elena Manina (Russian Federation), is currently Chief of the Staff Counselling and Welfare Unit of the UN Assistance Mission In Afghanistan (UNAMA). She started her journey with the United Nations in 2007, serving as a UN Volunteer Staff Counsellor with the UN Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), then the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Today, she shares what her UN Volunteer experience has meant to her.

I started my career in the UN System as a UN Volunteer from 2007 to 2013, serving in two UN missions. As a former UN Volunteer, I still have the foundation of volunteerism in my profession. I strongly believe that counselling and volunteerism are quite similar, as both help people to counter the effects of stress, anger and anxiety, as well as combat depression.

“ Volunteerism provides a sense of purpose, helps

“ build and increase your social and relationship skills and builds confidence. It has helped me achieve my career goals, given me an identity and made me the person I am. Hence, no matter what my contract status is, I will always be a volunteer at heart.

When I look back, it has been a very long but successful journey in different wonderful places across the globe. Like everyone else, I have had my ups and downs in life. Having most of my experiences in post-conflict settings has been tough, but this has also taught me many things in life. It opened the door for a long professional journey and endless possibilities.

One of the major challenges I faced during my journey was race and gender bias, which came with a tag of being a woman. For some, I was "too opinionated", "too strong", "too loud" and, at times, "too white". These challenges have taught me that if you speak your mind, you are opinionated; if you say no, you are strong; if you fight for what is right, you are loud; and if you are a woman – no matter how educated or capable you are – you will be judged.

I cherish my years of serving as a UN Volunteer, where I supported UN mission staff members going through difficult moments both in their personal and professional lives. These occasions – especially in the conflict context – helped me to learn not only from my own experience, but also from the people I supported. It was a truly humbling experience and built a strong foundation for me to help my colleagues navigate through the thick and thin of their lives.

In this time of uncertainty, as we face a global challenge with the COVID-19 crisis, it is natural to feel stress, anxiety and worry. If you are someone with health issues or a chronic illness, COVID-19 is likely only amplifying already existing feelings of worry and ambiguity.

My advice for volunteers serving with peacekeeping missions and in stress situations like the pandemic response is:

“ Find ways to stay socially connected and engaged; social distancing doesn't mean a lack of

“ connecting. Isolation can increase anxiety and depression, especially for more vulnerable people. Use this time to stay virtually connected. Use text messages, video chat and social media to access social support networks. Talk about your concerns and fears [...] Focus on what you can do and accept the things you can't control. Remember: You are NOT ALONE!!

- Set time aside to breathe: It may seem silly, but when we face anxiety, our body activates our sympathetic nervous system, which prepares us to fight, flee or freeze.
- Know it is OK to ask for help: Asking for help is difficult for many people, especially for those who already have been using social support to navigate health issues.
- Set daily routines that include being creative : It's important to try to create and maintain a daily routine, regardless of the disruption of unfamiliarity and isolation. This helps us to maintain a sense of order and purpose in our lives.
- Stay informed through reliable sources: this includes the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and other reliable well-established news outlets.
- Focus on what you can do and accept the things you can't control. Remember You are NOT ALONE!!

Elena Manina, from the Russian Federation, is currently Chief of the Staff Counselling and Welfare Unit of the UN Assistance Mission In Afghanistan. She holds a PhD in Psychology and has more than 15 years of experience as a Psychologist. Her areas of focus include counselling, psychotherapy in the areas of substance abuse and addiction, emergency management, employee grievances, community and self-development, as well as social resilience and conflict management in post-conflict areas with offices like the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), UNMIT, UNMISS and UN-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).



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