



The AIIC Project to help Interpreters in Conflict Zones (ICZ)

Tips and hands-on strategies to cope whilst interpreting over the long term in situations of conflict

Before the assignment

- Make sure you know or research the parties involved, names of places and people as events occur, the stakes involved for all sides.
- Know your own values, beliefs. Be proud of them and cherish them: they'll make you strong and determined. But remember you must be professionally impartial.
- As a professional interpreter, your job is to interpret all parties faithfully. Helping everyone to understand every point of view is your unique contribution in the situation at hand. Your task is to think and act professionally, to maintain your professional integrity. Your heart may not always be impartial but your voice must be – you might be helping make a historical record of events. Truth matters.
- Know who is recruiting you, to do what and where (will you be at home, in a studio, in the field?): media interview, witness interview, talks between parties, NGO work...different situations will require different preparation and perhaps special protection (flak jacket, helmet, info about your blood type or medication you are taking). Also, bear in mind that things may develop in an unforeseen manner and you might be unable to reach your base within the expected timeframe – always carry with you the essentials for a night out (water supply, your medication, contact lenses kit, some cash, a few energy bars...).
- If you are required to travel with the client away from your domicile and they are providing transportation, ask them in advance about the company policy with respect to health and travel insurance. Will you be covered too?
- Feel free to refuse an assignment if you think it is too dangerous, if you are tired (from previous assignments or other activities), if you feel that



you will not be able to remain neutral and objective enough. We all have our limits and boundaries. This job may mean risking your life and limb. Think carefully about whether your limits may have been reached before accepting it.

- Try to make your clients aware of what your needs are as an interpreter, in order to do your job efficiently.

During the assignment

- If necessary, explain to your clients again what you need, as an interpreter, to do your job: to be placed in a position where you can clearly hear what is being said, have regular breaks...
- Do your job as best as you can, but just your job and nothing more. You are not a social worker, you are not a caregiver, you are not a psychologist, or a well-meaning friend, you are not an activist of a cause or a spokesperson, just the interpreter. This is your very valuable contribution in war and conflict. Other professionals will take care of the rest.
- In precarious situations, rely on your own common sense to react, but try to communicate to others around you why you believe the situation is dangerous and seek, if possible, help or advice.
- When what you have to interpret feels emotionally overwhelming, concentrate on the bare words you have to translate, do not picture what they mean, try to become your voice only. Cut the context, become "dry" and professional. It may help to have a pen and paper ready and when the emotion comes up, mark it on the paper, write it, draw a cross, a sign... channel your emotion down on to the paper to avoid letting it stifle your voice. Keep it there, you can come back to the emotion later on, after the assignment.
- Try to think of the bigger picture, i.e. why you are there in the first place (you are the communication link; you are proud of your skills and profession; you want to help the truth come out; you need to earn a living in a situation where dependent family members or friends might not be able to because of the war...) such thoughts may help you keep your emotions in check.



- Never hesitate to ask for a break if you feel tired, or overwhelmed. You are a human being, you are entitled to feel emotions, exhaustion, hunger or thirst. Also, know it is ok to feel afraid or emotional. Try to keep it under check; it will help you behave sensibly and cautiously. If the fear, however, does not let you think straight, if it is "louder" than your other thoughts or emotions, remove yourself from the situation as soon as is possible and take time off.

After the assignment

- Take enough rest
- Spend time with your family and friends, doing things you like. It is ok not to want to answer questions about what you have seen or heard on the job even if the information is not sensitive or protected. Wait until you are ready: your loved ones will understand.
- When you feel ready, debrief, go back to the emotions you suppressed during the assignment (crosses on paper) and try and process them with colleagues, a psychotherapist, your loved ones, spiritual practice, prayer....

In general

- Take good care of yourself: this is the condition for you to be able to go on doing your job and remain efficient and useful in it.
- Be in touch with colleagues
- Even in times of war, remain in touch with your friends from before the war if possible. It will help you get back your "normal life" afterwards if you do not feel disconnected from them for too long.
- Be proud of what you do, value yourself.



Some other useful links

In 2012 we co-authored and published a [Field Guide](#) for Civilian Translators/Interpreters and Users of Their Services in Conflict Zones, together with [Red T](#) (where all the language versions of the Field Guide are easily found) and [FIT](#).

[European Federation of Journalists 16-point protocol for journalists covering conflict zones](#)

[CPJ guide on physical safety in war reporting](#)

[Humanitarian Interpreting](#)

https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2017/09/AUT_Handbook-Asylum-Interpreting_en.pdf

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/emotional-intelligence-translators>

<https://www.equiminds.eu/jessica/>

<https://betweenheadandheart.co.uk/>