

AFTER LIBERATION: HANDBOOK FOR THE REINTEGRATION OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

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**After Liberation:
Handbook for the Reintegration of Political Prisoners**

Project Director:Lilian Tintori

Lead Authors: Berta Valle, Gloria Wu

Contributing Authors: Manuel Llorens, Camilo Sánchez, John Shaffer,
Anaïse Kanimba, Félix Maradiaga

Editors: Lilian Tintori, Antonieta López, Stephen Parks, Juan Cardona,
Katelyn Bremer

Advisers: X21 Consulting, Javier Cremades, Juan Carlos Gutiérrez,
Diego Zambrano

Design and Illustrations: Sandra Natasadu Grafik, Jorge Perdomo

Project Assistance: Miranda Mora, Sylvia Popoli, Mariana Suárez

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They could unjustly imprison your body, but never your conviction to seek justice. Your journey through the desert opened new paths, and your faith bore fruit.

Your family was root, was light, was the sky you could not see for so long. Now, together, you walk toward a new dawn:
Freedom.

Political Prisoner Support Team



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FOREWORD

To those who have been released, yet still carry the marks of political imprisonment:

If you are reading these words, it is because you—or someone you love—has endured one of the harshest trials a human being can face: political imprisonment. Perhaps you were the one behind bars, held without a fair trial, torn away from your family, and cut off from the world. Or perhaps you were the one who waited on the outside, carrying hope while living with fear, uncertainty, and pain each day of confinement. Although the cell door may have closed behind you, we know that physical freedom does not erase the wounds.

This manual is born out of a silence. Much has been written about how to demand the release of political prisoners, but far less about what comes next—after. After the bars. After exile. After loss. After the headlines fade and daily life resumes, often in unfamiliar countries, with no documents, fragile health, and hearts that need healing. Reintegration is rarely immediate. Health, trust, stability, and connection cannot be recovered overnight. And there are no words—or manuals—that can fully repair what was taken from you. Yet we have also seen that recovery is possible: step by step, broken lives can be rebuilt, purpose can be renewed, and dignity can be reclaimed. Most importantly, none of this has to be done alone.

This handbook is dedicated to you—those who have paid a steep price for freedom—and to your families, who carried the struggle with you. It is meant as a practical and humane guide to help you rediscover your voice, your strength, and your purpose. You will not find perfect recipes here, but you will find real experiences, concrete tools, and lessons learned from the solidarity of others who have walked the same path. This is not a substitute for the justice you deserve, but it seeks to accompany you until that justice comes. Within these pages you will encounter avenues for healing, access to rights, possibilities

for reparation, and ways to sustain yourself in this new chapter of life. Above all, it honors those who, upon regaining freedom, choose to continue the struggle—raising their voices for liberty, human rights, and democracy—living proof that even after prison, the cause endures.

This manual also pays tribute to the memory of those who never returned. May their absence never be forgotten. May their suffering, and the pain carried by their loved ones, inspire us to continue working for a world where no voice is silenced for demanding freedom, justice, and human dignity.

You are not alone. We remain with you, as you take these first steps beyond the bars, reclaiming both your freedom and your future.

— Political Prisoners Support Team
World Liberty Congress

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, authoritarian regimes continue to suppress fundamental freedoms. Countless individuals are arrested, detained, or unjustly prosecuted for exercising their rights to expression, association, and defending human rights. These regimes manipulate elections, dismantle civil society and the rule of law, centralize power, and deploy militarized police to intimidate and harm civilians—all while evading accountability.

Within these systems, dictators have mastered arbitrary detention to silence dissent. It strips individuals of their right to protest, and of their freedom and safety. Political prisoners are isolated from their families, causes, and communities. The aim is clear: trap dissenters and deter future voices. It is both cruel and effective.

It is fundamentally wrong—and deeply unjust—to torture, harm, or arrest people for hoping for a better society. Across the globe, dictators imprison critics with impunity. Upon release, many receive no support, are sometimes forced into exile, and face profound uncertainty alone. After imprisonment, rebuilding life without resources or community can feel just as painful.

Despite the immense challenges and consequences of political imprisonment, we stand with you unwaveringly. Intimidation and despair are exactly what these regimes seek. Release is not an end—it is the beginning of a demanding chapter marked by psychological trauma, loss of identity, legal limbo, economic hardship, and often displacement.

If you are a former political prisoner or someone who has endured arbitrary detention for political reasons, we are here to help you navigate that transition. This handbook accompanies political prisoners and their families, offering guidance and support toward a dignified, sustainable future. This manual, *After Liberation: Handbook for the Reintegration of Political Prisoners*, is a practical guide to support you.

You may be concerned about personal safety, unfamiliar with migration regulations, unsure how to rebuild in a new country, or how to approach psychological recovery. You may seek guidance to continue the struggle for democracy—from exile or after detention. Many challenges upon release remain insufficiently addressed; here, we bring recommendations together.

Conditions and experiences vary widely—across and within countries. Some endure solitary confinement; others face house arrest. Some have access to books or visits; others suffer degrading treatment, inhuman conditions, or torture. After release, support ranges from strong community networks to exile and isolation. Prior exposure, resilience, education, and socio-economic background also shape outcomes. Uniform recommendations are impossible; this manual offers general guidance based on common patterns, knowing no single set fits every context.

Legal systems differ substantially, adding complexity. Even among authoritarian states, some formally acknowledge international norms against arbitrary detention and torture, while others reject them outright.

According to the University of Virginia’s End Arbitrary Detention program, at least 78 countries hold political prisoners or individuals arbitrarily detained for political reasons. In Iran, detention is used for political bargaining; in Venezuela, a “revolving door” produces cycles of arrests and short-term releases. Cuba and China impose long sentences—15, 20, or life—while in North Korea, information on detainees is scarce. These disparities extend to life after release: some states offer asylum pathways, humanitarian visas, or academic protection programs like Scholars at Risk; others provide none, and many mechanisms have been weakened by shifts in global cooperation. This manual does not attempt exhaustive legal analysis. It highlights common patterns, points to resources, and offers broadly applicable recommendations. More specific, updated information will be available on an accompanying online platform.

The World Liberty Congress reaffirms its commitment to stand with those who have paid the highest price in defense of freedom.

This manual is part of that collective effort—not to leave behind those who have been silenced. It is a tool for healing, rebuilding, and moving forward.





Chapter 1

PREPARATION FOR THE RELEASE

Release may come with little or no notice. Families might be informed only hours in advance, yet preparation can begin earlier. Prepare yourselves by asking:

- What will you say in the first moment you see them?
- What questions will you ask?

Running through scenarios helps make the first encounter less overwhelming. Alongside emotional preparation, plan practical steps. When notified, prepare clothing, hygiene items, and essentials. In the excitement, details are easily overlooked; a simple plan helps. Bring close family or trusted friends who can travel to meet the released; familiar faces create a sense of security, especially in uncomfortable or unpredictable settings. If possible, involve a doctor and a lawyer, though

Preparation for the Release

this may not be realistic. Above all, document the person's physical condition at release or immediately after to preserve records for future legal action.

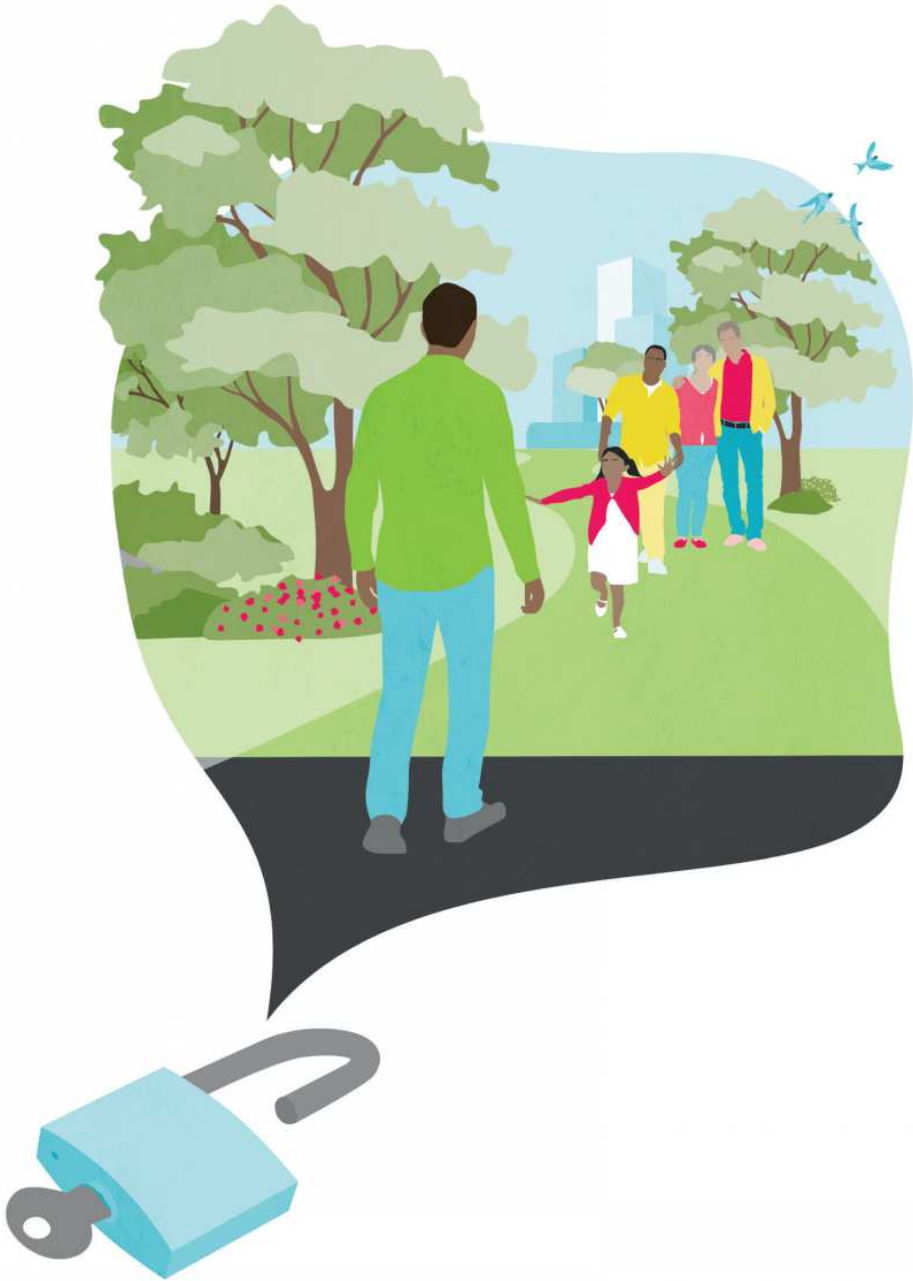
Checklist: Release Kit Essential

Category	Items to Prepare	Notes
Identification	ID card, release papers, copies	Keep duplicates safe
Health	Medications, doctor contact info	Include emergency numbers
Basics	Clothing, cash, transport plan	Adapt to local conditions
Security	Trusted contact person, safe phone	Confidential & discreet

As soon as the context is known, prepare for the environment and actors present. Will release occur at the prison, a courthouse, or elsewhere? Will media be present? Will the released be expected to speak? Will the regime leave them alone, or might paramilitaries, supporters, or hostile crowds be there? Anticipating the context helps families take necessary security precautions and plan public messaging accordingly.

Beyond logistical planning, families should learn about the psychological impact of political imprisonment and torture. Loss of freedom, isolation, violence, and humiliation can leave lasting emotional wounds. Understanding common aftereffects—like hypervigilance, withdrawal, irritability, or insomnia—can prevent misinterpretation and unintentional harm. Basic counseling or mental health resources can guide families in supporting their loved one without adding emotional pressure or asking intrusive questions. Even well-meaning phrases like “it’s over now” or “be strong” may deepen distress. What matters most is offering steady support, patience, and a safe, nonjudgmental space for recovery.

Families should seek legal guidance or support from experienced human rights organizations ahead of time. Upon release, authorities often present documents with legal or political implications—sometimes



Chapter 2

THE FIRST WEEK AFTER THE RELEASE

You have just been released. In an instant, you move from confinement—ruled by routine and restriction—into a world of movement and unpredictability. Everything feels new: sunlight, fresh air, busy streets, even riding in a vehicle. After so long without choice, you may feel you could walk anywhere for hours. Your body is free, but your mind may still feel confined by the memory of detention.

Immediate Medical Attention

In the first 24 to 72 hours, a comprehensive medical check-up is essential.

- Conduct full-body scans, take blood tests, and document every injury or condition. These records serve as evidence in asylum applications or reparation claims.
- In the days that follow, monitor any signs—pain, weight loss, sleep disturbances, untreated infections—and seek treatment promptly.

Early intervention is more effective. Addressing chronic injuries and ailments promptly helps avoid the higher costs and greater risks of late-stage care. Families can support this process by observing changes, encouraging medical visits, arranging follow-ups, and ensuring prescriptions are filled.

For women and others who may have experienced sexual violence during detention, medical care must be handled with special care. Families should watch for signs of trauma—like withdrawal, irritability, sudden crying, or avoiding touch—and offer empathetic, nonjudgmental support. Specialized psychological help should come first, followed by medical attention. Even without visible injuries, trained professionals can assess and document psychological harm. Above all, emotional safety must be protected, and any decision to report or pursue legal action should honor the released person’s wishes.

Handling Media Pressures

For Waleed Shawky, a co-founder of the April 6th Youth Movement in Egypt, it was important for him to have a message prepared after being released. His story was a human story of success—prison being one of the worst experiences that any human can endure. The circumstances are very harsh, and it should be celebrated that a human being was able to prevail against such hardships, all while staying sane and committed to their core values. “This is my life, my dignity. I don’t want to surrender this,” he remarked; he wanted people to know he wasn’t broken.

At the moment of release, immediate demands can be overwhelming. Media may be waiting to record the moment, and you may be asked to give on-the-spot interviews or speeches. Showing strength upon release is a testament to having endured—and overcome—the regime’s intent to break them. Having a powerful and impactful message prepared is important, and for that, you must take time to think and process emotionally first before responding. The timeline for you to feel ready to respond looks different from person to person, and that is why you should always respond on your own terms.

Case Study: Responding on Your Terms to Media

Vladimir Kara-Murza, a prominent Russian dissident, was detained without trial and remained cut off from his family for over two and a half years. His release came unexpectedly as part of a multi-nation prisoner swap brokered by the United States and several European governments. Upon hearing the news, his wife,

Evgenia, and their children rushed to greet him at the airport—eager for an intimate reunion after years of separation.

A journalist friend offered to film the moment. To most observers, it would seem a powerful human-interest story: a family torn apart by political repression, reunited on camera. Yet Evgenia declined. She recognized that exposing her children's first vulnerable reactions could do more harm than good. The journalist respected her decision and her privacy.

The Kara-Murzas' response to the media shows the importance of taking the time before responding and returning to the spotlight. It is important to remember that you are not obligated to respond immediately to every request. Choose to engage with reporters who respect your timing, your privacy, and your process of recovery. Healthy relationships with the media are built on mutual respect—your openness when you are ready, and their patience in allowing you the space you need.

It is recommended that before making a statement you should:

- **Pause to Protect from Trauma:** Take the time you need to process your raw emotions away from cameras. Every detail shared can have personal, emotional, or even legal repercussions. Therefore, it is advisable to set clear boundaries about which aspects of the experience you wish to share, which will remain private, and when is the appropriate time to do so. Emotional protection and safety must always prevail over public curiosity.
- **Assess the Media Terrain:** In detention, you likely missed key developments, shifts in public opinion, or new tactics used against dissenters. Choose carefully whom you speak to. Some outlets genuinely stand with you; others pose as allies only to exploit any misstep, searching for contradictions they can twist into justification for re-arrest. If you're still in your home country, this "revolving door" of detention looms larger: a single misquoted phrase might be weaponized against you.

The Revolving Door: A term used to describe the practice of some authoritarian regimes of temporarily releasing political prisoners only to re-arrest them shortly afterwards. This mechanism seeks to project a false image of openness or compliance with international agreements, while keeping victims and their families in a permanent state of uncertainty, surveillance, and legal vulnerability.

- **Align the Family Narrative:** Years of separation and the fierce campaigning they carried out on your behalf can leave them with a narrative of their own—one that may not perfectly align with yours once you're free. Aligning on the story you'll tell together ensures your words won't inadvertently sow mistrust or confusion among those closest to you. Remember: every phrase you choose now can shape public perception, influence your safety, and impact your loved ones' lives.

Examples of topics you can discuss as a family for creating a unified narrative are:

1. How much do we want to share publicly about the case?
2. Are there any security risks to speaking out, and are there any topics that should not be discussed publicly?
3. Is there an amount of time we want to agree on to stay private and refuse any public appearances?
4. Are there family members who don't want to be included in any public campaigns moving forward? If so, how can we protect their privacy?
5. How much more are you willing to give for the cause, and are there any hard limits and boundaries that need to be set moving forward?

Rebuilding emotional bonds takes time and mutual listening. The released person should be able to talk about their prison experience and the changes that happened while they were away. This exchange restores a

sense of belonging. Family members should share their own stories with empathy and patience, avoiding emotional pressure or rushing the process. Listening and sharing with love and patience is a way to heal together.

Navigating the Decision: Activism or Going Low-Profile

This is a super personal message for you and your family. Right now, you may feel burned out, guilty for being released, or torn between jumping back into activism, providing for loved ones, or simply hiding. You may even feel pressure to compensate for the lost time. Even if the media or supporters demand action, you need to slow down. Only you can choose your next step. Focus on the present and future—reconnect with your body, your mind, and your purpose—and trust that, with time and reflection, the right answer will emerge.

Resuming activism isn't a moral obligation, nor is staying silent a permanent surrender. You can speak out immediately, wait a year, or shift between visibility and withdrawal. Silence can feel like a second death, stripping away your identity and hope.

Practically, activism is time-consuming, unpaid, and exposes you to surveillance, threats, or even re-arrest—and you can't lead a movement or much less get back on your feet from behind bars. Furthermore, the reality in certain countries is that even if you resume your activism from within the country, there might be nothing that can be done. If you try to return to protesting or opposing the government, they will just recapture you immediately. In such situations, the best option is to first rebuild, educate yourself, and wait for an opportunity.

But remaining silent risks being forgotten or labeled a “coward,” especially in exile, where regimes may smear your reputation, jeopardize asylum claims, and weaken the movement you helped build. Silence can feel like a second death, stripping away identity and joy.

For those who chose to continue speaking out, it was a way of coping and making meaning out of their struggle. Life makes someone a politician and an activist. It is because you have your own worldview, and you cannot accept the injustice and oppression you experienced. For the family members of the released, you spoke out because you could not accept the violation of having your loved one unjustifiably detained. There is meaning to the struggle, even if you didn't choose it from the beginning. Only you can decide when or if to resume the struggle.

Priorities in the First 7 Days

Priority	Key Actions	Common Risks
Health	Medical check-up, rest, nutrition	Ignoring symptoms
Security	Low profile, avoid surveillance	Early re-arrest
Media/Public	Delay interviews, coordinate msgs	Overexposure, harassment
Family/Support	Private reunions, emotional care	Pressure for activism

My Personal Notes



Chapter 3

PHYSICAL SECURITY

The first weeks after release bring intense emotions and pressure. You'll face a major choice: stay or leave the country. Don't rush this decision or let others push you. Staying keeps you close to family, community, and your cause but risks constant surveillance, harassment, or re-arrest. Exile offers immediate safety but forces you to leave home and rebuild in an unfamiliar environment.

When deciding between staying or going into exile ask yourself:

- What are the real risks to my personal safety if I stay?
- Can I realistically rebuild a normal life here, or will persecution continue to follow me?
- What will my decision mean for my family's safety and wellbeing?
- Do I have networks or organizations abroad that can help me re-establish myself?

Take the time to work through these questions. Exile may be the safer or even the only viable option if:

- The risk of re-arrest is high. Authoritarian regimes often release prisoners only to detain them again.
- Daily life is impossible. If you cannot find work, access services, or even move freely without harassment, remaining at home may only deepen vulnerability.
- Family is at risk. If your presence inside the country brings

danger to loved ones, leaving may be a way to protect them.

- Health cannot be cared for. Many ex-prisoners leave with serious medical needs. If your country denies you treatment, exile may be necessary for survival.
- You are silenced. If you cannot speak, write, or organize without endangering yourself or others, operating from abroad may give you back your voice.

Deciding on exile is not defeat but a strategic choice to preserve your life, freedom, and capacity to contribute. While regimes use exile to cut you off from your country and your people, you can transform it into a new frontline of struggle. You can reflect on your personal life plans before deciding to go into exile. If you decide to continue your education, it is advisable to identify countries or programs that offer educational opportunities and can recognize your prior studies. If the goal is to work, it is essential to research whether the host country allows short-term job placement or if special permits exist for refugees. If you need social assistance or humanitarian aid, you can inquire in advance about available programs, response times, and application requirements.

Use exile as protection. Reconnect with global allies and build bridges with organizations, universities, media, and governments to amplify your cause. Exercise your freedom of expression by speaking publicly, writing, and organizing. Establish a stable life abroad to strengthen your activism. Keep secure communication with those at home, advocate for detained political prisoners, and remind the world that the struggle continues.

Exile is painful but does not erase your identity, dignity, or purpose. It is a change of geography, not mission. By reframing exile, you turn displacement into testimony, absence into presence, and distance into strength.

Physical Security Recommendations

The dangers posed by an authoritarian regime don't end at release or exile. No place is completely safe, but some are safer than others. Living in perpetual fear undermines recovery. Building a sense of safety is crucial. Identify your personal triggers and create a secure

environment—lock doors, surround yourself with trusted people, and establish comforting routines—to counter the helplessness of detention.

For many former prisoners—especially those who remain in-country—the threat persists in new forms after release. Surveillance, “open” cases, house arrest, mandatory court appearances, and informal harassment can hover over the household like a permanent storm cloud. As one family member put it:

“We all became prisoners; the house was surrounded by police. We felt completely under surveillance.”

The goal is not zero risk (often impossible) but managed risk—enough structure to keep moving forward without ignoring the real dangers.

Security Protocols and Safety Management

Name the threat, make a plan. Hold a short family “safety huddle” once a week. In 15 minutes, review what’s changed (new calls, visits, cars outside), agree on do’s and don’ts for the week, and update a simple PACE communication plan (which will be introduced in the next chapter).

Baseline habits that lower exposure. Keep phones updated and locked; minimize location sharing; strip photo metadata; separate personal from advocacy accounts; avoid publishing routines or travel plans.

Map safe places and people. Identify two or three “safe venues” (church/NGO/clinic/embassy help desk, if applicable) and two trusted contacts who can be reached quickly. Share these with everyone in the home.

Document—calmly, consistently. Maintain a log of incidents (date, time, place, who/what). Save screenshots, messages, license plates. Store copies off-device (encrypted cloud or trusted ally). Documentation helps in court, asylum processes, and advocacy.

Designate a spokesperson. Choose one family member (or a partnering organization) to handle media and external inquiries. This

reduces conflicting messages and lowers pressure on the survivor.

Practice de-escalation. When approached by officials, use short, factual statements; avoid arguments on the doorstep; ask for names, badge numbers, and written orders. Record only if safe and legal.

Care for the nervous system. Fear is physiological. Simple routines—sleep, meals, daily walks, prayer/meditation, brief device-free time—help families stay regulated and think clearly under pressure.

Many “releases” are conditional. People leave prison with open cases, reporting duties, travel bans, or civil disenfranchisement. Some regimes can even escalate their punishments.

After freeing 222 prisoners in Feb-2023 and 135 more in 2024, the Nicaraguan authorities stripped nationality, confiscated assets, and labeled them fugitives, pushing families to restart from legal limbo in exile.

As principle, legality is part of safety. A clear paper trail and timely filings are shields—slow to build, powerful over time. Here are some steps you can follow in order to navigate the legal maze.

Security through a Judicial Framework

Get a legal map early. With legal counsel (local or pro-bono), list your constraints (open case numbers, reporting dates, travel limits) and immediate options (appeals, remedies, humanitarian permits, asylum/statelessness claims). Put deadlines on a calendar everyone sees.

Build the evidence file. Organize: ID and civil docs; arrest/court papers; medical reports; proof of property loss; news/NGO reports corroborating your case; incident log. Keep a duplicate set offsite.

Know your rights at the door. Learn what officials can and cannot do in your jurisdiction. Prepare two or three phrases to use when asked for information, and a plan to contact your lawyer

or support NGO.

Leverage institutions. Where safe, inform reputable NGOs, bar associations, or human-rights clinics about ongoing legal harassment. In exile, ask recognized organizations to issue letters of support summarizing your situation for landlords, schools, or employers.

Plan for status. In host countries, move quickly on immigration pathways (asylum, complementary protection, humanitarian parole, statelessness procedures). Lawful status unlocks work, banking, and healthcare—and reduces leverage of the persecutor.

Protect assets and documents. If confiscation or freezing is likely, consult counsel about preventive steps; keep notarized copies and translations; record inventories with photos and witnesses.

Mind your public narrative. Speak truth with care: avoid revealing details that prosecutors can misuse while cases are open. Use a designated spokesperson and vet public statements with counsel when stakes are high.

While the strategies above emphasize building security through routines, some families have found other unique methods to build a sense of security. Below are some additional approaches that families have used:

1. Never travel or drive alone in the first months—always bring a family member or trusted companion as a witness in case of danger.
2. Take extra precautions at airports, especially in arrival/departure halls that operate in legal grey zones regimes sometimes exploit.
3. Enlist the media as third-party witnesses—befriending journalists means any incident you face will be reported immediately.
4. Apply for UNHCR protection—even if enforcement is unclear, holding “protected” status can offer peace of mind.
5. Make public appearances, such as speaking at international

conferences—visible documentation of your release makes any re-arrest far harder to hide.

Case Study: Protecting Identity through Deidentification

After being diagnosed with early-stage cancer, one former prisoner needed to receive treatment in a hospital and go under anesthesia. He was very afraid of being put under—stemming from a deeply rooted fear of being unconscious and helpless, and suddenly waking up in detention again. The family had selected a hospital for its location, so that a close network of people could support him through the treatment. However, since many others of their diaspora also frequented the same hospital, it was possible that they could recognize his name from the medical records and expose him to the public—or to the regime. His family decided to try asking the doctors to change his name to a fake name in the system. And... It worked! The individual was able to go under anesthesia and recover comfortably at the hospital with less paranoia of being identified.

While these types of requests might not be possible everywhere, it is an idea of what can be done by just trying. By remaining open to diverse strategies, researching all possible options, and staying flexible and adaptive, you can choose approaches that make the most out of your given circumstances.

Key Takeaways

- Deidentification can be a practical security tool in high-risk contexts, even in formal environments like hospitals.
- Never assume a request is impossible—test unconventional solutions by asking competent professionals.
- Research local policies and advocate for accommodations that protect your identity.
- Stay flexible: adapt strategies as new risks or opportunities arise.



Chapter 4

DIGITAL SECURITY

While you may be beyond the regime’s physical reach, they can still monitor your digital activities. Protecting your physical security means securing your online presence—leaked personal data can expose you to threats.

If your devices were confiscated, assume they and their accounts are compromised. Secure new devices if possible; otherwise, factory-reset all existing ones. Create new email and social media accounts—or, if that isn’t feasible, change every password and log out of all sessions. Then enable strong multifactor authentication on each account.

To organize your digital assets, list and rank them by priority. Use the examples below to identify which accounts and devices matter most.

Personal Inventory

- Credentials for email, communications, and social media accounts
- Credentials for devices
- Personal photos (not intended for sharing with the public)
- Travel plans
- Locations of meeting places or other safe spaces where you can have discussions outside of the purview of the regime

- Personal contact information (including physical addresses) for close friends and associates
- Planned events for protests or other activism
- Credentials (e.g., username/password) for banks and crypto wallets

Once your digital assets are listed, learn how the regime targets people online so you can tailor your defenses. Some use cyber armies and custom malware; others buy commercial spyware or continuous monitoring services. By understanding the specific tools they deploy, you can choose the right protections.

When researching, reach out to fellow freed prisoners, opposition parties, nonprofits, and human rights groups, or look for credible reports on your regime's tactics. Be sure to first clear and protect your devices before reaching out, to ensure you are not putting others at risk.

When considering the regime's ongoing digital surveillance of former political prisoners, you may face four core security challenges:

1. Personal device protection from hacking and spyware
2. Social media safety
3. Secure communications and organizing
4. Safeguarding personal and sensitive information online

Review all recommendations, but tackle them in the order that meets your most urgent needs.

Personal Device Safety Against Hacking and Spyware

Authoritarian regimes often purchase commercial spyware to monitor your digital activity. Spyware is malware that secretly collects information

from your device—most commonly phones, but also tablets and laptops. Depending on its sophistication, it can read encrypted messages, record calls, track your location, access photos, and even activate your camera and microphone.

Spyware infections occur mainly through spearphishing and zero-click attacks. Spearphishing uses targeted emails, texts, or messages that trick you into downloading malware or clicking a malicious link. Zero-click attacks exploit undisclosed vulnerabilities in apps or software to install spyware without any action on your part.

Case Study: Pegasus Spyware Attack

Between September 2020 and July 2021, the phone belonging to Carine Kanimba, the youngest daughter of hotelier Paul Rusesabagina, known for the events of ‘Hotel Rwanda’, was infected with Pegasus spyware. The spyware could be used to listen to private calls, access the device’s camera, track the location, and access other private app data and communications on the phone. Later, in June 2021, the spyware was triggered and used to monitor a meeting between Carine and Sophie Wilmes, then the Belgian foreign minister.

Pegasus infections often go unnoticed until it’s too late—sensitive conversations and movements may already be exposed. Once compromised, the device itself becomes an ongoing surveillance tool.

Proactive Security Measures

- Apple devices (iPhone/iPad/Mac): Immediately enable Lockdown Mode, which blocks common spyware attack vectors. Note that it disables automatic message attachments and certain web code. (Apple Support: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT212650>)

- **Google/Android devices:** Enroll in Google’s Advanced Protection at the account level. It requires a hardware security key (e.g., YubiKey or Titan) and defends against phishing and unauthorized access. (Google Advanced Protection: <https://landing.google.com/advancedprotection/faq/>)
- **Daily maintenance:** Fully power off and restart devices each day to clear potential malware; keep operating systems and apps up to date to close security gaps.
- **App vetting:** Install only verified apps. Spyware often hides in fake applications—RCS Labs, for example, has deployed counterfeit apps on Android and iOS in Italy and Kazakhstan.

All of the previous recommendations are at the prevention level. But if you suspect that your device is already infected, try AccessNow’s Digital Security Helpline. Access Now’s Digital Security Helpline supports individuals and organizations worldwide with real-time technical assistance and advice to keep them safe online. You can access the helpline at: <https://www.accessnow.org/help/>

Social Media Safety

Social media is vital for activists but also weaponized by regimes to suppress and discredit you. Common tactics include:

- **Account takeover:** hacking your profile to spread disinformation
- **Fake accounts:** confusing supporters and amplifying regime messaging.
- **Doxing:** releasing phone numbers, addresses, family details, or other sensitive data.
- **Harassment:** smear campaigns using bots or hired actors.

- **Policy weaponization:** abusing content-policy reports to remove your posts or deplatform you

To protect your social media accounts, enable secure Multifactor Authentication (MFA) on all important accounts. Having MFA means that you must authenticate to your account/device using at least two methods out of options like passwords, a hardware token or device, and fingerprint or facial recognition. The following methods are recommended in order of most to least secure:

1. Hardware Token (FIDO2 - Asymmetric Cryptography-based, most secure), YubiKey is a common example.
2. Authenticator App (symmetric encryption), Google Authenticator is a common example.
3. Push: The service sends a notification to a device where you are already logged on.

Note: SMS: While SMS (or ‘text messaging’) is a type of MFA, you should AVOID choosing SMS. SMS has inherent security weaknesses and is easily exploited.

Maintain strong security hygiene—lockdown modes, regular reboots, and timely updates—since platforms often offer little support when you’re targeted. If your account is compromised, get a civic actor (or equivalent) status on priority platforms. This will endow your accounts with a higher level of priority should the regime take them over or otherwise try to target them. You typically need to work with a 3rd party organization (ex: AccessNow) that will advocate on your behalf. You can contact AccessNow for additional support.

Secure Communications and Organizing

A cornerstone of your strategy for secure communications and organizing activities should be the development of a Primary, Alternate, Contingency, and Emergency (PACE) communications plan. The PACE plan should be shared and agreed upon by everyone you regularly communicate with. It doesn’t have to be elaborate; its goal is to establish and maintain secure communications regardless of any attacks from the regime. You can also consider non-digital options.

The elements of a PACE plan are as follows, and you can brainstorm a communication plan for each part as you go along:

Primary: Choose a routine and the most effective method of communication, like Signal and Threema.

Your primary plan: _____

Alternate: Then choose another common method of passing a message, still using a secure communication platform. Alternate communication may be used along with primary methods under normal circumstances to ensure readiness. For example, if you primarily use Signal, you can use WhatsApp or Threema as an alternative.

Your alternate plan: _____

Contingency: You should also have a third method of communication in place. This method will normally not be as convenient or efficient as the first two methods, but it is capable of passing traffic when needed. SMS or voice calls might be examples of reliable contingency communications, though lacking in confidentiality. To compensate, you should establish guidelines beforehand regarding what is acceptable to communicate through this contingency platform and whether to use code words/phrases.

Your contingency plan: _____

Emergency: This is a method of last resort, which is likely a more difficult and slower means of communication. An example would

be passing physical messages between people or going to a pre-arranged meeting spot at a specific time.

Your emergency plan: _____

As a released political prisoner, it is crucial to establish a PACE plan before contacting personal contacts or resuming organizing work. When choosing secure messaging apps, evaluate their server jurisdiction, encryption protocols, and whether they've undergone independent audits. [Securemessagingapps.com](https://securemessagingapps.com) offers detailed comparisons. Select an app that's compatible and easy to use for your network, widely adopted locally to avoid suspicion, and resistant to censorship or blocking.

Protecting Personal/Sensitive Information in the Digital Space

After inventorying your digital assets, use your regime research to frame an ACTD plan: Applying Operational Security, Compartmentalization, Transience, and Perception Shaping. Balance each measure against its time, resource, and efficiency costs.

Applying Operational Security (OPSEC): Think like your adversary to identify and protect your most sensitive data. Basic cyber hygiene plus the other ACTD elements is a solid start. Resource: <https://securityplanner.consumerreports.org/>

Compartmentalization: Isolate activist and personal activities—use separate devices, accounts, browsers, and locations to force adversaries to split their efforts.

Transience: Rotate devices, accounts, and routines regularly so attackers must start from scratch each time.

Perception Shaping: Assume constant monitoring—phones, social media, visitors, and surroundings may be watched. Use low-risk tactics to steer attention away; avoid covert operations. For active deception or legal questions, consult security and legal experts.

Basic Perception Shaping Rules:

- Assume everything is monitored.
- Protect others—never expose colleagues or loved ones.
- Verify legal constraints; seek legal counsel.
- Commission formal risk assessments for advanced measures.

These steps help reduce attention and slow targeted attacks without creating false narratives.

Control public messages

- Use short, factual statements.
- Appoint one trusted spokesperson or organization to handle media.
- Stagger announcements (don't publish plans or timelines all at once). Limit what you share
- Avoid posts that reveal location, routine, or travel plans.
- Strip metadata from photos before posting. Search online to find tools that can strip metadata from photos.
- Move sensitive discussions to encrypted messaging and off public platforms.

Use institutional channels

- Work through NGOs, universities, or international partners when possible; institutional cover shifts scrutiny away from one individual.
- Encourage allies to frame public attention around broader

issues (other prisoners, legal reform), not your private life.

Reduce predictability

- Vary travel times, meeting places, and routes within normal limits.
- Prefer public or official venues (embassies, NGO offices) for meetings rather than private homes.

Protect family and contacts

- Train family on basic digital hygiene and safety.
- Avoid sending relatives sensitive files or devices across borders.
- If relatives are targeted, report incidents promptly to support organizations.

Digital Security Considerations for Exiles vs. In-Country

If you remain in your home country, the regime can track your location, subject you to physical surveillance, and rearrest you. Regimes often control telecommunications—monitoring, censoring, or shutting down the internet during political unrest—and intercept any unencrypted communications, hampering your ability to coordinate.

If you live in exile, they may target your relatives with surveillance, threats, or violence. Choose communication methods carefully and limit personal details. Teaching basic digital security to loved ones back home can help reduce their risk.

Case Study: Watering Hole Attack

Between September 2023 and March 2024, hackers likely working for the Chinese Communist Party compromised the website of organizers for the annual Kaygu Monlam festival, an international Buddhist prayer festival held in India that is very significant for Tibetan Buddhism. The attackers placed a script on the website that verifies the IP address of the potential victim. If this IP address was within one of the targeted ranges of addresses, it showed a fake error page enticing the user to download a “fix” named certificate. This file is a malicious downloader that deploys the next stage in the compromise chain, identified by a .exe extension in Windows or .pkg in macOS. If successfully compromised, the victim’s machine was infected with the Nightdoor backdoor, which allowed the hackers to collect data from and send commands to the victim’s machine. The attackers targeted members of the Tibetan diaspora in India, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, and the United States.

Key Takeaways

- Provide basic digital-security training to your team and partners to reduce their exposure.
- Vet and monitor websites commonly visited by your community for unauthorized scripts or watering-hole compromises.
- Enforce device hygiene: unique, strong passwords; multi-factor authentication; regular OS and app updates.

The digital sphere is now inseparable from daily life. Staying informed and upholding digital hygiene routines is your best defense. While regimes adapt, civil society and nonprofit groups offer accessible resources to counter threats. With consistent practice, these habits become second nature.





Chapter 5

RECOGNIZING AND MANAGING STRESS AND TRAUMA

Former political prisoners and their families face immense challenges after release. Coping strategies can stretch your resources to the limit, and lingering trauma may overshadow this moment of freedom. Amid the celebration, you still must ask, “What now?”

The length and conditions of political imprisonment vary, but most survivors face extreme deprivation and constant threat. These inhumane environments trigger intense stress reactions. Understanding these responses—and exercises to manage them—can help you regain control. We begin with stress mechanisms and move into more complex emotional reactions. It is important to emphasize that none of the tools or exercises proposed in this manual replace professional mental health care. The self-care strategies described in these pages are a complement to psychological treatment, not a replacement for it.

Emotional and Psychological Responses:

Stress: it is a built-in response to danger. A sudden threat—like a loud noise—triggers fight-or-flight: increased alertness, faster heart and breathing rates, tensed muscles, and slowed non-essential functions. Fear readies you for action; anger primes defense. When escape seems impossible, the body may “freeze,” slowing heart rate and inducing paralysis. This shutdown, a survival instinct, later links to survivors’ feelings of disconnection.

Post-Traumatic Stress: Trauma overwhelms your ability to process extreme helplessness or near-death experiences, leaving memories fragmented. These unintegrated fragments surface later as uncontrollable reliving—flashbacks or nightmares—characteristic of post-traumatic stress.

Emotional Dysregulation: Trauma overwhelms your ability to process extreme helplessness or near-death experiences, leaving memories fragmented. These unintegrated fragments surface later as uncontrollable reliving—flashbacks or nightmares—characteristic of post-traumatic stress.

In our interviews with former Venezuelan political prisoners, they often reported that the sound of keys rattling for long after their release caused them some anxiety, as it was the sound they eagerly awaited when visitors arrived or when they were allowed out into the yard. In another example, a former political refugee sought a consultation because, after watching a film that featured scenes from the student protests he had participated in, he began to feel his heart racing when he exercised. The increased heart rate triggered a fantasy that he might be having a heart attack, even though a medical evaluation found no medical problem. This is a typical example of dysregulation. The anxiety triggered by the film heightened his physiological alarm response and the subjective interpretation of being at risk of death.

Disconnection/Dissociation/Avoidance: Survivors often report emotional numbness, boredom, or disinterest. Dissociation separates painful memories from awareness—leading to gaps in memory or feelings of unreality. Some people avoid places, people, or topics that remind them of their trauma, sometimes even inventing alternate identities to escape painful associations. *In some cases, this goes to extremes. Nazi concentration camp survivors, such as the writer Jorge Semprún, fabricated a false identity and invented a fictitious past that they lived with for many years to avoid having to think about those experiences again.*

Re-experimentation: Intrusive memories and flashbacks force traumatic moments back into awareness. Nightmares return dissociated fragments to consciousness, triggering panic, horror, or physical distress long after the event.

How to Recognize your Symptoms:

Recognizing your emotional responses is the first step to regaining control. The traffic-light model maps three stress levels: green signals safety and connection—when you feel calm and secure in trusted company; yellow indicates heightened alertness and readiness for fight or flight; and red marks extreme threat, triggering a shutdown where bodily functions slow to avoid detection.

Take time to discuss the daily sensations and reactions you're experiencing. Mapping your emotions to the traffic-light model helps you see that these responses are just your body's way of handling extreme situations.

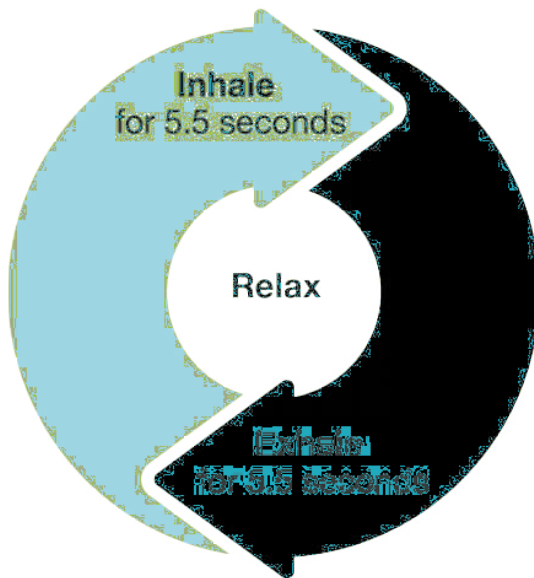
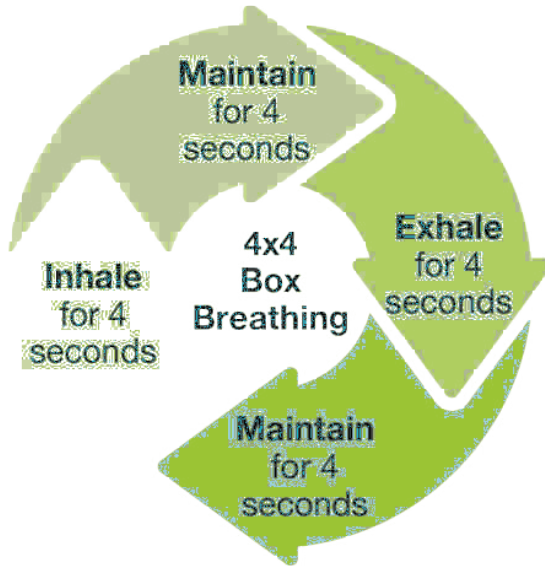
Response Level	Type of responses	Physiological reactions
Green	Security, connection	Digestion, active immune response to fight infections, rest, pleasure, well-being, recovery, blood circulation to non-vital organs, blood circulation in extremities, oxytocin release
Yellow	Alert, fight or flight	Hypervigilance, feeling overwhelmed, terrified, and angry, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, increased blood circulation to vital organs, pupil dilation, and adrenaline release
Red	Paralysis	Release of endorphins that cause anesthesia, lethargy, freezing, decreased heart rate, decreased blood pressure, decreased interpersonal interaction (isolation), decreased immune response

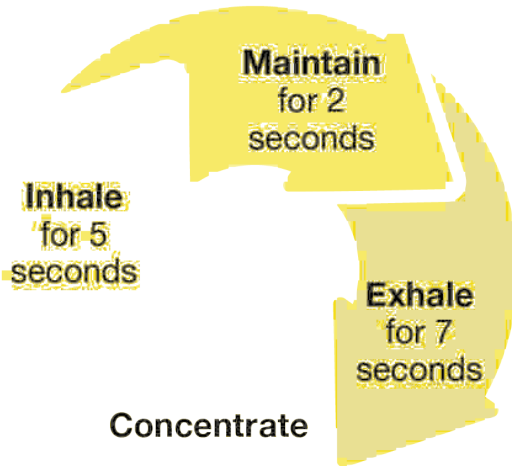
1. The first step in easing discomfort is ensuring safety—both physical and relational. That means staying in protected spaces, connecting with caring people who can sensitively support you, and meeting basic needs like food, medical care, and clothing.

2. Improving emotional regulation depends on which response is dominant. If you're stuck in the yellow (fight-or-flight) zone, work on identifying your triggers and using calming strategies after intense emotions.

3. If you're in red (freeze/paralysis), focus on actions that help reactivate your body and mind.

For more immediate calming strategies, here are three breathing exercises that can help calm your nervous system, improve your concentration, and help you relax:





Complex Posttraumatic Stress: When trauma is repeated and inescapable, it can lead to complex post-traumatic stress. Political prisoners often endure prolonged danger and may continue to feel this stress even after release under authoritarian rule.

Survivors of extended captivity may face difficulty in close relationships, shifts in self-image and belief systems, and confusion toward their captors. These reactions often coexist with emotional dysregulation, dissociation, intrusive memories, and avoidance.

If you recognize multiple symptoms and have a history of prolonged extreme stress, you may have Complex Post-Traumatic Stress. It's important to seek professional help if you suspect this condition.

Grief, Prolonged Sadness, and Depression

Grief is the expected response to significant losses. As survivors of political persecution, you may have lost freedom, property, nationality, a sense of justice, and security. Grief often brings sadness, pain, anger, and hopelessness. Your whole family may share these losses and

feelings. Memories of past suffering can resurface long afterward if left unaddressed.

- Be kind to yourself, take all the time you need to assimilate the impact of your experience. Be patient with your body and your emotions. Some unsettling sensations should improve over time.
- Identify your emotional regulation mechanisms. Think about what activities, places, and people have helped you throughout your life to deal with difficult emotions. What have you turned to when you've felt pain, fear, anger, etc.? Do exercise, music, friendship, prayer, laughter, dancing, your work, writing, meditation, taking a shower, taking walks, going to nature, being with animals, etc., help you? Recover those that have been helpful and have them available for this phase of recovery.
- Find ways to express yourself. To the extent that you feel the need and tolerate it, find ways to express what you've experienced. Find trusted people who can accompany you in reconstructing your testimony; write, paint, and share with others who have experienced similar things. If the experience of sharing what you've experienced ends up overwhelming you, consider seeking help.
- Recover the meaning and purpose of your life. Take your time, but consider how you can channel what you've experienced in a way that furthers your life purpose. What meaning has this entire experience had in your personal and family journey?

Case Study: Knowing When to Seek Help

The wife of a former political prisoner describes the day of his release as one of overwhelming joy. Yet, as she explains, the months that followed revealed a different and more complex reality.

“The day of my husband’s liberation brought immense joy, but after the initial relief, another reality set in. About six months later, I began to feel symptoms returning—restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and disinterest in activities I had once valued, including my human rights work. The advocacy that had given me purpose was no longer at the center of my life, and I felt uncertain about the future. Liberation did not mean the end of anxiety; it only changed its form. Seeking therapy was essential. With professional support, I learned emotional regulation tools, regained clarity, and slowly began to rebuild my sense of purpose.”

Self-help strategies can only go so far. When stress and trauma symptoms persist, professional assistance becomes crucial. Emotional struggles are not a sign of weakness but a natural bodily response to trauma. Professional help can assist you in identifying symptoms and signals you may not have noticed yourself.

There is also a possibility of developing depression. Depression is more than just feeling sadness—it is a medical condition with many symptoms that persist over time. Some of these symptoms include:

- Feeling sad or empty
- Feeling hopeless or helpless}
- Feeling worthless
- Feeling excessively guilty
- No interest or pleasure in activities
- Anger and irritability

- Feeling tired and having a lack of energy
- Insomnia or lack of sleep
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions
- Lack of appetite
- Overeating and weight gain
- Aches, pains, and physical symptoms
- Trouble ‘switching off’ the brain
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If you've been grappling with a cluster of these emotions for an extended period, it is essential to seek prompt medical attention. Depression is a serious condition—don't dismiss or deny its symptoms. Though mental health struggles often lack overt physical signs, they are just as real and impactful in the mind, spirit, and body. Ignoring or downplaying your mental well-being can have devastating consequences for both you and your loved ones. If these symptoms resonate with you, please seek help from a qualified mental health professional without delay.

Key Takeaways

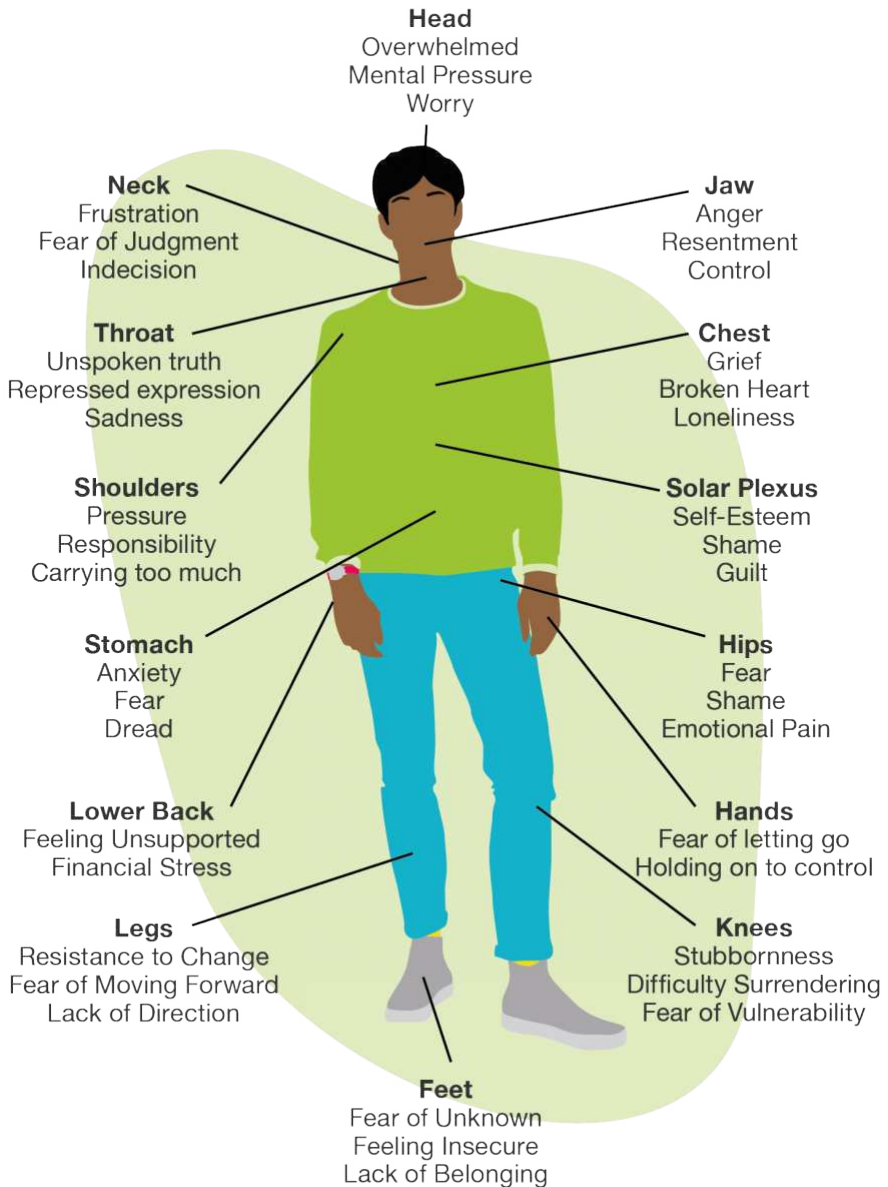
- Emotional management exercises and positive life changes may shift—but not eliminate—underlying anxiety and trauma.
- Persistent stress or trauma symptoms signal the need for professional intervention.
- Promptly seek medical or mental health support when multiple depressive indicators appear.
- In the case of a severe depressive episode, look up crisis hotlines in your region immediately. You can find international suicide prevention numbers here: <https://blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines/>

The Importance of Maintaining Physical Health

Some recommendations echo earlier chapters by design. Trauma recovery starts with the body: routine sleep, proper nutrition, and regular movement. Mind and body are inseparable. Chronic pain or fatigue can magnify anxiety, irritability, or despair, making hope feel distant. Conversely, every small improvement—better sleep, less pain, a satisfying meal, or ten minutes of walking—builds mental resilience and sparks confidence to face the future.



The Body Speaks



We assume that if you are able to exercise, you are mobile and free of urgent medical issues. However, if you have lasting injuries, neurological symptoms, severe pain, or limited mobility, get a full medical evaluation and work with clinicians (primary care, sports medicine, physio/rehab, dental, and mental health). Always seek professional clearance before starting or resuming exercise, especially with heart, respiratory, metabolic, or musculoskeletal conditions.

Case Study: The Cost of Neglecting Minor Injuries

One former elite endurance athlete told us he was forced during interrogations, for almost two years, to sit for hours with his hands cuffed behind his back. After his release, he dismissed the resulting back pain as “minor.” Without treatment or exercise, the injury worsened quietly, and two years later he faced severe complications.

His experience shows that even small physical injuries, if ignored, can become major problems. Early evaluation and steady, gentle movement can prevent lasting harm. Today, this former political prisoner has resumed medical treatment and remains active in his fight for his country’s freedom.

Key Takeaways

Even “minor” injuries can escalate if untreated; seek early assessment.

Bodies heal at different speeds; if pain worsens or feels unsafe, pause and consult a clinician.

Consistent, modest physical exercise taken with trusted people turn physical recovery into lasting strength, dignity, and peace of mind.

Small wins—improved sleep, reduced discomfort, a light meal, a short walk—fuel resilience.

There are two non-negotiables you should follow.

- **Sleep is medicine.** Protect it as seriously as you would any prescription.

- **Keep exercise social and gentle.** Prefer light activities you can enjoy with others. Go soft and steady, not hard and fast.

Opening up About Your Experience

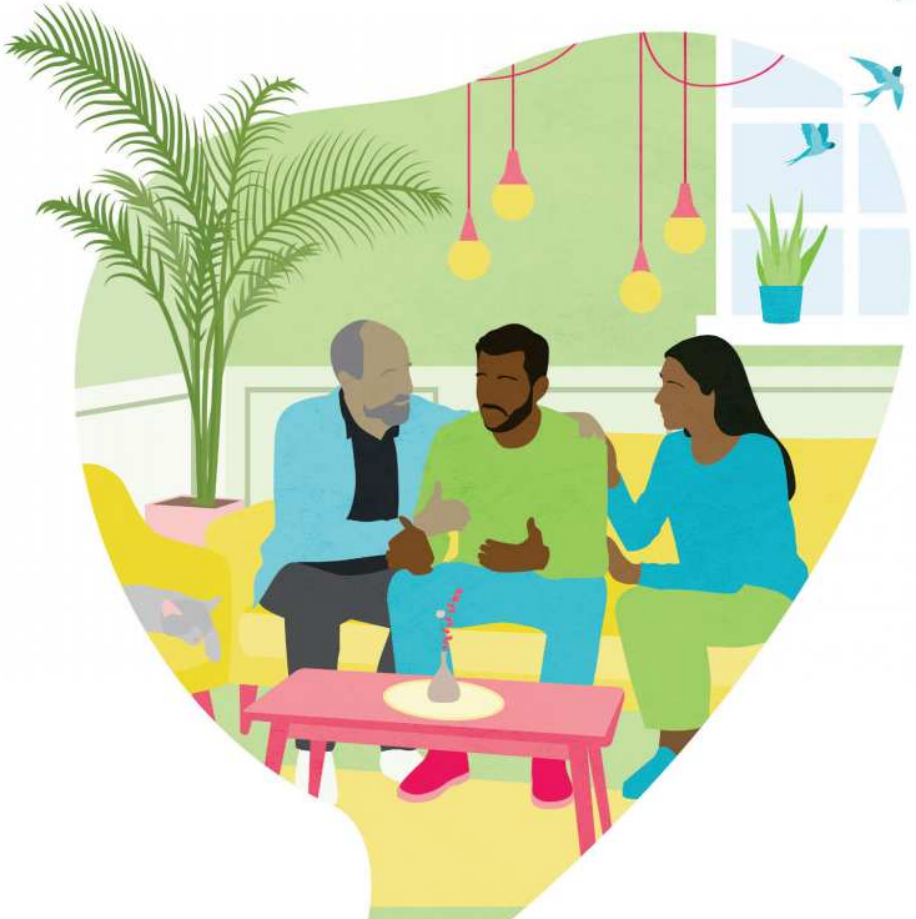
If you do not tend to get overwhelmed when recalling traumatic experiences, gradually begin telling your loved one about them. This may take time, but when you're ready, start by sharing some facts. Family members can watch for emotional dysregulation. Sharing what happened helps build a complete memory narrative, and people with fuller memories usually have fewer symptoms than those who can't discuss their experiences. A safe listener offers crucial emotional support.

If you can't share aloud, try journaling. James Pennebaker found that 20 minutes of writing about trauma for four days improves emotional and physical health. He showed journaling can boost mood, reduce doctor visits, and benefit the immune and cardiovascular systems.

Journaling Recommendations

Write for 20 minutes a day for four days straight. You can write about a painful emotional experience. Try to write about that experience from a different perspective each day. During these sessions try writing continuously—without worrying about spelling or grammar—write without dwelling too much on the memory, but just writing about whatever comes to mind. You can also write to yourself; do this without thinking about sharing it. After you are finished, reflect on how you feel at the end of the 20 minutes.

It is often reported that the exercise leaves the person with some lingering sadness that usually improves over time. However, if this exercise leaves you feeling hopeless or devastated, it may be wise to seek professional help.



Chapter 6

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RECOVERY AS A FAMILY

The next step in repairing your family's emotional rupture is to come together as a collective. Roles will shift on return — parents who managed alone must now share duties, and the energy spent caring for the imprisoned relative must refocus on new challenges. Rebuilding connections disrupted by distance takes time and open conversations to negotiate these changes.

Family relationships operate through emotional co-regulation: each member's inner state affects the others. A returning loved one brings emotional burdens that can heighten stress in parenting or trigger guilt. Creating safe spaces for sharing deep emotions is essential but challenging.

Rather than just watching for silence or speech, families should actively foster trust. If the released person needs to talk, listen patiently and without judgment, even if it means hearing the same stories repeatedly. If they're reluctant, offer quiet presence, affection, and reminders that you're ready to listen whenever they choose.

Attention to the Emotional Needs of the Family Members

Family members—spouses, children, siblings, parents, or close friends—carry a hidden burden. Their fear, sadness, anger, and emptiness are often overlooked, yet without their healing, the family’s ability to recover is weakened.

Acknowledging your emotions is not a sign of weakness but a step toward balance. Recognizing these feelings allows you to care sustainably for your loved one.

You need restful moments to restore energy and support networks—friends, community groups, or professionals—can prevent isolation and lighten emotional loads.

You also need to give yourself permission to set boundaries and share caregiving responsibilities without guilt. You should encourage yourself to pursue your own hope and purpose beyond that caregiving role.

Supporting family members isn’t optional. When family members receive care, they can accompany their loved ones with patience and preserve their own dignity and resilience.

Attention to the Emotional Needs of Children

An emotionally available family member—whether the released parent or another trusted adult—is one of the strongest protective factors for children who have endured trauma. Supporting their recovery means healing the emotional rupture they’ve suffered, giving the reunion real meaning, and reaffirming the family’s identity. Here are some guidelines for families to help their children:

Families can support children by:

- **Allowing a gradual reconnection.** Children may feel joy mixed with fear, confusion, or anger. These ambivalent emotions are normal and need validation. They may also fear losing the parent again or feel guilty if the returning caregiver is distant or irritable.
- **Recognizing the complexity of the process.** Children may seek affection while the caregiver feels emotionally overwhelmed. Both

realities are valid and need patience. Healing happens through repeated ruptures and repair attempts over time.

- **Reassuring them.** Children often imagine they are to blame for what happened. It is crucial to remind them, clearly and often, that none of it was their fault.
- **Using familiar strategies to calm.** Routines, activities in nature, and time with pets can create safe spaces where emotions can be released more easily.
- **Paying attention to “well-functioning” children.** Some children hide their pain to avoid burdening their parents, even taking on adult roles. It is important to ask them directly how they are, to give them permission to express doubts, fears, and frustrations.
- **Providing safe spaces and information.** Include children in age-appropriate conversations about what the family will face, and as they grow, help them navigate information—especially on social media, where psychological manipulation and distorted narratives can appear.

Finally, family members must also acknowledge their own exhaustion. It is valid to feel overwhelmed by children’s emotional needs, and it is wise to seek the help of other trusted adults who can step in to share the load.

Family Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth

Various coping styles have been described that contribute to coping with traumatic experiences without serious impairment. For example, people who are able to find meaning and purpose in their lives, believe they have the ability to influence their surroundings, and also believe they are capable of learning from negative life experiences tend to cope better. This set of attitudes allows them to face extreme difficulty without feeling entirely passive or victimized by circumstances. People who tend to be very controlled with their emotional expressions, tending toward emotional repression, have also been shown in some studies to not suffer as many post-traumatic symptoms. Finally, people who maintain the ability to laugh in the face of adversity, those who cultivate space for positive emotions in the midst of disaster, also seem to cope better with traumatic experiences.

Case Study: Journey to Post-Traumatic Growth

Victor Navarro began a slow process of recovery after his release and exile, which included psychotherapy. In this process of emotional healing, he felt an important piece was missing: justice and bringing the world to light about the crimes against humanity committed by the Venezuelan government. That's why he wrote a book about his testimony.

He then turned that testimony into an even more ambitious project. Together with other survivors from the same prison, he designed an experience that shows the conditions in which he was held through virtual reality. He literally built a mechanism that allows others to see inside the prison where he was held. That experience led him to become an important spokesperson for other political prisoners. His activism and work with other survivors have been fundamental in making sense of his experience and finding relief.

Navarro's work exemplifies post-traumatic growth, the process by which individuals transform suffering into new strengths. He combined personal therapy with creative advocacy—first through a memoir, then by co-creating a virtual-reality reconstruction of his cell—to reclaim agency and raise awareness. By sharing his story and collaborating with fellow survivors, he converted his trauma into a catalyst for justice and community healing.

Key Takeaways

- Post-traumatic growth turns adversity into opportunity: survivors can find empowerment by creating new projects or roles that honor their experiences.
- Justice and storytelling can accelerate healing: documenting abuses in a book or immersive medium gives trauma a constructive outlet.
- Collective action strengthens resilience: teaming up with other survivors amplifies impact and provides mutual support.
- Reclaim your strengths by inventorying what helped you survive and thrive under extreme conditions.
- Draw inspiration from role models and “silent heroes” who

resisted injustice, then adapt their lessons to your journey.

Give Meaning and Purpose to Pain

The wife of a former prisoner told us that after her husband's release, questions about how to rebuild the family resurfaced. Family recovery opens a space to think together about what comes next? This involves the urgent immediate needs that will surely need to be addressed, the emotional needs of each member that were disrupted by the separation, and, on a broader scale, the purpose or meaning of what they want to dedicate their efforts to.

Recovering your life requires reconnecting with your deeper purpose. This family stayed afloat by holding fast to values like unity, mutual care, and love, alongside collective principles of freedom, justice, and solidarity. These ideals became the bedrock of their resilience. In the same way, take time to reflect on your own family and personal values.

One exercise to give purpose to your experience is practicing gratitude. Writing in a journal or expressing appreciation boosts activity in the prefrontal cortex—improving decision-making and emotional regulation—and increases dopamine and serotonin, which lifts mood and sharpens thinking. A daily gratitude practice is a powerful counter to our brain's natural negativity bias.

Gratitude Practice



In the morning:

Write down three things you are grateful for (health, wealth, relationships). Imagine: What would life be like without these three things?

Notice how these three things do exist, and savor the positive sensations and emotions.



Before going to sleep:

Write down three things that went well during your day.

Savor the positive sensations and emotions for at least 30 seconds.

Staying Positive

One of the most notable aspects of interviews with family members is how, in the midst of grief, they often laugh and recall joyful or moving moments that provide some relief from the anguish and pain. Shared songs, painting together, games they invented with their children, and so on.

In these meetings with victim's families, we have tried to not just focus on the difficult stories, but also made time to sing, eat together, dance, and laugh. These spaces, with some of the former political prisoners, are deeply healing.

In the Brazilian film "We Are Still Here," about the forced disappearance of Rubens Paiva and the impact on his family during the 1980s dictatorship, there is an emblematic episode in which some journalists go to report on the family. When asked to stand in front of the home for a family portrait, they all smile, and the photographer tells them it's a report on a terrible event, and that the editor suggested a "less happy" photo. The mother ironically says, "Oh, he wants us sad," and defiantly insists, "We're going to smile." The smiling photos of the family accompany the entire film.

Laughter and joy must be preserved and defended even under the weight of oppression. It's not easy to find light in moments of despair or intense stress. Yet we must strive to hold onto, and focus on, whatever happiness or positivity still exists in our lives.

Case Study: Turning Conviction into Collective Purpose

When Félix Maradiaga was arbitrarily detained for his political beliefs in Nicaragua, his wife Berta Valle and their young daughter endured years of separation and uncertainty. After his release and exile, the joy of reunion came with new questions: How do we rebuild our lives after such loss? For Berta, the answer went far beyond material recovery.

“Rebuilding your life isn’t about money or status,” she reflected. “It’s about living your values. Félix has always said: ‘I believe in freedom, and I am committed to defending it at all costs.’ Seeing him live that conviction taught me that true rebuilding means staying faithful to who you are.”

In the months following his release, the couple transformed their pain into purpose by launching the End Arbitrary Detention Initiative at the University of Virginia, where Félix now serves as Professor of the Practice on Global Democracy. Through this initiative, they seek to elevate the issue of political imprisonment as a global human rights concern and promote an international agreement recognizing arbitrary detention for political reasons as an inhumane weapon that destroys individuals, families, and communities.

Beyond this effort, Berta continues to accompany others walking the same road she once did. As co-founder of the Political Prisoners Support Team, a program of the World Liberty Congress, she remains dedicated to supporting the families of current and former political prisoners—helping them navigate advocacy, recovery, and reintegration.

For Félix and Berta, rebuilding life after repression means living their convictions through action. Their shared commitment to freedom has guided them to transform suffering into service—turning pain into a platform for justice and democratic solidarity.

Together, they remind us that healing is not only personal but also collective. By standing firm in their values, they demonstrate that integrity and compassion are the true foundations of renewal.



Chapter 7

ENSURING ACCESS TO FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS

While much of this section applies more to those in exile, some of the recommendations can be applied to those who remain within their home country but have trouble accessing basic necessities.

The goal is to plan ahead, as much as you can. Before arrival, sketch a basic budget for your first three to six months: rent, utilities, transport, food, medications, and document fees. Include your spouse or dependents in the calculus. Research real prices by neighborhood; costs can vary widely within the same city. Even with preparation, the first weeks will hold surprises—so build a small safety net if possible (savings, a pledge from a trusted friend, or short-term support from an allied organization). Reach out early to anyone in your network—family, friends, former colleagues, diaspora groups—so you know whom to call for advice or help in a crisis.

Accounting for Material Needs

Political imprisonment almost always produces economic shock—and release does not flip a switch. In exile, families face unfamiliar systems and costs. At home, old jobs vanish, clients retreat out of fear, and donors or friends may assume “the crisis is over.” Here are some immediate steps to stabilize and rebuild, to manage economic stressors.

Practical steps to stabilize and rebuild:

90-day survival budget. List non-negotiables (rent, food, transport, medicines). Cut recurring leaks (unused plans/subscriptions). Identify one quick income stream per adult (temporary work, deliveries, tutoring, care work) while you pursue medium-term options.

Income ladder (short - medium - long term).

Short: gigs and day labor; small services to trusted networks; modest crowdfunding with a clear purpose and end date.

Medium: certificates or short courses aligned to local demand; credential evaluation where viable; remote/online work.

Long: re-credentialing, apprenticeship, or entrepreneurship with a basic business canvas (costs, customers, channels, risks).

Activate your social capital. Tell your trusted circle what kind of work you seek; ask for three introductions each. Often, opportunity arrives through people, not platforms.

Use institutional doors. Register for available social services; approach refugee/immigrant aid groups for case management, job placement, language classes, and small grants.

Protect your financial identity. Keep copies of IDs, legal filings, medical records, diplomas; store scans securely. If banking access is blocked, explore compliant alternatives with legal/tax guidance before using any workaround.

Value your story. If you’re invited to speak or write, do not be afraid to ask up front about honoraria or travel support. Your time

and expertise have value—naming it is part of rebuilding dignity.

Family workload is shared. List weekly tasks (paperwork, job search, school, care work) and distribute them explicitly so one person does not carry everything. Revisit the list every Sunday.

Mindset: progress is uneven. Celebrate small wins (first interview, first invoice, first class completed). Momentum fuels resilience

Accessing Housing and Basic Services in Exile

First priority: a place to rest without fear. Many exiles spend their first nights in borrowed rooms or rotating shelters. That is a bridge, not a destination. Prioritize sleep and safety over perfection: four solid walls, a lock that works, and a commute you can manage.

Case Study: Building Stability Through Cooperative Housing

Newly exiled families often face steep deposits, guarantor demands, and discrimination when hunting for rentals. To overcome this, many focused on neighborhoods with established immigrant communities—where landlords are more flexible with non-standard documentation—and verify total move-in costs and required paperwork upfront. When availability is limited, they secured shared housing, sublets, or rooms through faith groups and NGOs, using on-time payments to strengthen their rental history. At the same time, they registered early for essential services—healthcare, schools, transit, and aid—and kept digital and paper records organized.

In 2023, 222 Nicaraguans were released together in the United States by Daniel Ortega’s regime. Many of these former political prisoners faced immense challenges in rebuilding their lives. Among them, three families chose to pool their resources and work together for a common goal. Through long hours of demanding construction work and determined saving, they eventually managed to purchase a home together in a more affordable area. By working together, they accomplished far more in a short time—laying a strong foundation for their new life.

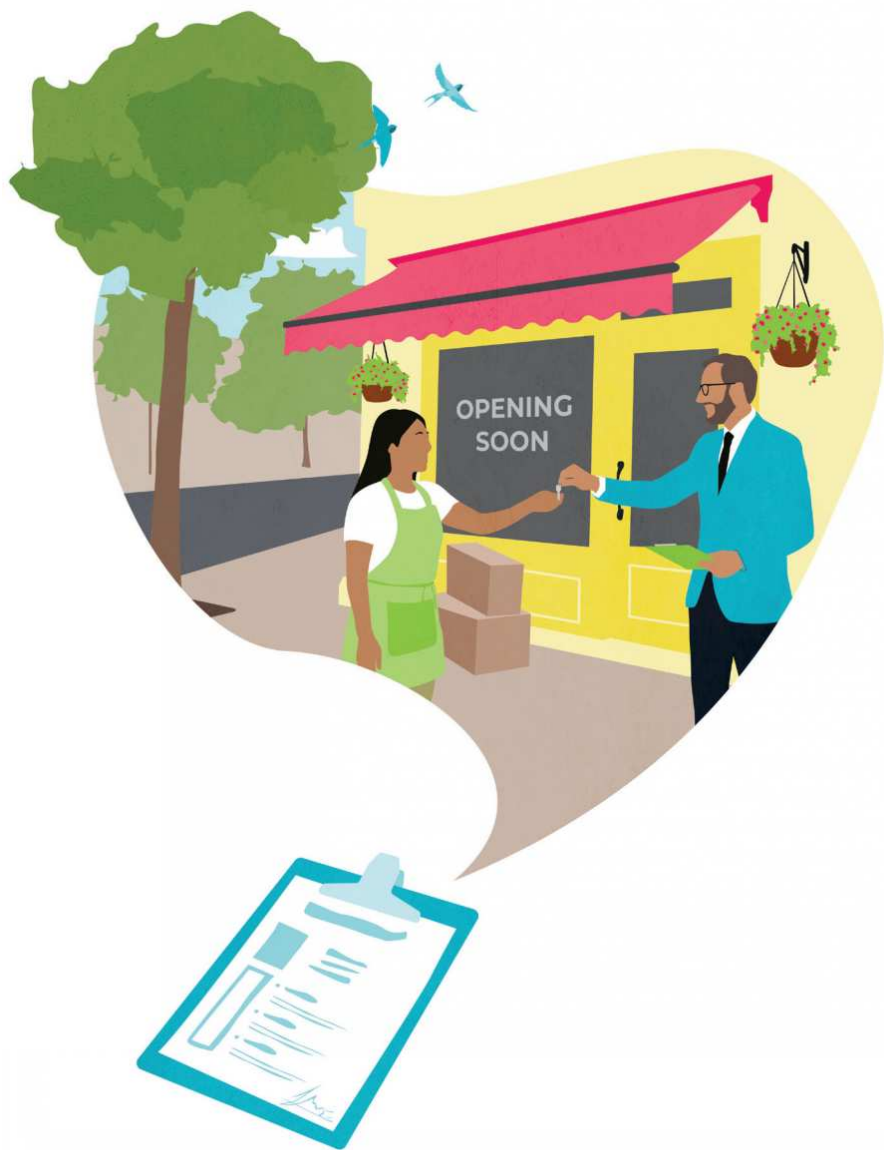
Key Takeaways

- Target neighborhoods with immigrant communities for greater landlord flexibility.
- Clarify total move-in costs and distinguish required vs. preferred documents before applying.
- Use shared housing or sublets via community networks to build on-time payment credentials.
- Register immediately for local services and maintain tidy digital and paper files.
- Protect your well-being: limit viewings, document each showing, debrief, and refuse unfair treatment.
- Consider pooling resources and labor with peers to fast-track homeownership and stability.

Finding a place to live, managing legal documents and applications, and learning how to access resources can be challenging at first. If you acquaint yourself with the processes, navigating these tasks becomes much easier. Here are some additional resources for making the transition smoother:

- Look towards community networks or refugee support centers. These networks or centers have internal publications about safer and more affordable rental housing and housing assistance programs.
- Register with the country's social services. Sometimes, there may be additional benefits for asylum seekers, such as public health care.
- Contact NGOs or other international humanitarian aid groups that operate in your country of exile. The groups may not be able to sponsor you directly, but they can connect you to potential donors. Do not be afraid to be open about your experiences and financial needs in these moments.
- Process your immigration status as soon as possible. Having status allows you to open bank accounts, access basic services that citizens are eligible for, and qualify for formal employment.

Always carry a copy of your asylum application or your immigrant ID card with you.



Chapter 8

REINTEGRATION AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT- HOME COUNTRY

Reintegrating into society and regaining economic stability is a demanding journey. The odds may feel stacked against you, with pressures from all sides. By now, some time has passed since your release, and begun to confront the emotional and psychological effects of imprisonment. Though trauma and pain may linger, recovery alone isn't enough. Healing is essential—but so is rebuilding. Your task is to keep moving forward, finding a workable balance between financial and professional needs and emotional and social well-being. There's no perfect formula; expect to reassess and adjust as you work toward a healthier equilibrium.

This chapter provides guidance on reintegration and economic empowerment, starting with the scenario of remaining in your home country. The next chapter explores these challenges in exile. A note on structure: although the chapter is organized around two scenarios, most lives do not fit neatly into categories. As a former political prisoner—or a family member—your decision to stay or leave may change over time. Reintegration is rarely linear. With that in mind, apply the guidance that serves you, wherever you are on the path.

Family and Social Life

Even if you've returned physically, past relationships may need to evolve. Reintegrating into the broader community can be especially complex. You may encounter distrust, stigma, gossip, or fear. In regime-controlled environments, you might be seen as either a threat or a martyr. Even being portrayed as a hero can feel isolating and dehumanizing.

As one family member of a political prisoner shared, seemingly overnight, she noticed people began to distance themselves. On social media, followers quietly disappeared. At work and among friends, some would offer polite words of sympathy, only to cut off contact soon after. At a family gathering, a simple group photo turned into a source of tension when relatives asked that it not be shared online. Despite the isolation and pain, she chose not to let bitterness take root. Instead, she focused on the people who remained close and on rebuilding a support network grounded in empathy and shared purpose. Over time, she found strength in community again—one built on genuine connection and understanding.

Word spreads quickly, and old communities may distance themselves, fearing association. While you may understand their need for safety, being shunned by neighbors and excluded from public spaces can be heartbreaking. Humans need connection to thrive, and isolation can hinder recovery. Still, with your freedom comes the chance to rebuild relationships. You should:

- Seek out people and communities who share your values or have faced similar persecution.
- Your new social life may feel more private than before, but it's important to choose carefully whom to trust with your story.
- If you're spiritual, consider hosting or joining home meetings—private gatherings with trusted individuals that can foster deeper, more open connections as you heal.

The fear from your old community may not last forever; political shifts can create new openings for reintegration. Changes in your home

country may open paths to refuge in another city or rural area. Stay hopeful and vigilant—today’s isolation can evolve. Despite stigma, hold firm and remain dignified. Even oppressive systems can’t control everyone forever. In the cracks, you can build quiet connections with like-minded people until the right moment for full reintegration arrives.

Rebuilding a Professional Identity and Accessing Job Opportunities

The regime doesn’t just imprison our bodies; it tries to erase us from the professional world. They strip us of our nationality and our degrees, close the doors to higher education, and exclude us from employment networks.

As a former political prisoner or family member, the regime may attempt to erase your public identity through its networks. Drawing power from state-owned and private businesses in key sectors, it covertly blacklists you and pressures companies to avoid hiring you. In authoritarian states, many businesses comply—either out of fear or allegiance.

Despite these challenges, you can push back. You are more than a “former political prisoner”; you are someone who endured and survived efforts to break you. That resilience is a powerful skill—one you can harness and apply.

Begin by brainstorming with these prompts.

1. Identify what skills or capabilities you have.
2. Identify what you would like to relearn or start learning.
3. Identify where or from whom you can receive instruction or training.
4. Identify which places or platforms you can offer the service you choose.

Continuing Education and Skill Development

“I believe that studying is an act of rebellion, especially when the regime wants you to be ignorant, broken, and submissive. Everything you do to educate yourself is a way of saying, ‘You didn’t defeat me’”. -Yaritzha R. Mairena, former political

prisoner from Nicaragua

Even if formal education is no longer accessible, many alternatives remain. With internet access, you can read and watch educational content from home. Don't underestimate the value of informal learning. You can continue your education by enrolling in:

- Online programs through foreign universities
- Mass Open Online Course (MOOC) platforms
- Other distance learning options—some offer certifications for your resume or CV
- Social organizations may also provide community-based schooling

Your Experience in a Professional Setting

Discussing your imprisonment in a job interview is delicate—you don't know if it will open doors or close them. High-profile individuals may be recognized immediately, while others can steer the conversation toward skills and professional strengths. Either way, these moments offer a chance to reframe your story. You have the autonomy to choose what to share.

If you speak about your experience, focus on what you learned, how it strengthened you, and the skills you gained. Speak with dignity, not for pity. You don't need to justify being a victim of persecution—the fault lies with the regime. While stigma and prejudice are likely, some employers may see your story as a sign of integrity, resilience, and commitment. The challenge is to keep trying until those spaces emerge.

Entrepreneurship with Dignity: Turning Experience Into Work and Livelihood

If traditional workplaces have shut you out, entrepreneurship remains an option. You can work independently or collaborate with fellow former prisoners or activists. Many turn to artisanal and informal work—food preparation, crafts, tutoring, beauty services, art, cleaning, and maintenance. Trusted networks like family and friends can help secure gigs or refer clients. With internet access, use online platforms to offer services or sell products, even under a pseudonym





Chapter 9

REINTEGRATION AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT- IN EXILE

Reintegration into social life means reclaiming a human way of living— healing your ability to bond and trust. Former political prisoners and their families often arrive in exile still carrying trauma, which strains close relationships. If you arrive with family, you may need to care for them while still needing care yourself. Exile can fragment bonds: children confused by change, parents suffering silently, couples breaking under pressure. Managing your emotional state is essential to avoid harming those around you. If you arrive alone, grief may isolate you further.

No matter your support system, you can't do everything alone. If you have dependents, offer routines of affection and truth. When your immediate network falls short, seek emotional support in women's groups, sports clubs, volunteer spaces, churches, immigrant communities, or diaspora networks. Sometimes, you may also have to create your own networks in exile.

Case Study: Turning Exile into a Platform for Freedom Networks

In February 2014, Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López raised his voice against Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship, denouncing corruption, repression, and human rights violations. His call for freedom was met with imprisonment. For seven years—four in a military prison, one and a half under house arrest, and another one and a half as a refugee in the Spanish embassy—he endured isolation but transformed suffering into purpose. From his cell, he understood that freedom is not just an individual right but a collective cause that transcends borders.

During those years, Lilian Tintori became his voice and the face of liberty. From Venezuela and across the world, she denounced abuses and demanded the release of all political prisoners. Her commitment, fueled by love and solidarity with thousands of affected families, turned pain into action.

When the regime seized their home, Lilian made a life-changing decision: she fled Venezuela by sea with her one-year-old daughter, Federica, sailing thirteen hours to a Caribbean island before reaching Madrid. A year and a half later, Leopoldo also escaped through Colombia's border. In 2020, after years of persecution and separation, the family reunited in Spain—turning survival into renewal.

From exile, they decided that freedom was not the end of the struggle but the beginning of a new chapter. Leopoldo founded the World Liberty Congress, an international alliance of democratic movements and human rights defenders from authoritarian countries. His leadership has since transcended Venezuela, uniting dissidents and activists worldwide.

Lilian, for her part, accompanies the families of political prisoners and promotes resilience and emotional well-being among activists inside and outside Venezuela. Together, they have built a community that crosses oceans and unites hearts, proving that liberty is not a privilege—it is a shared responsibility.

“They took away our physical freedom, but they could never imprison our faith or our hope. Today we continue to stand tall, building community, strengthening resilience, and working for a truly free Venezuela—and a truly free world.”

— Leopoldo López and Lilian Tintori

Key Takeaways

- Exile can be renewal: Distance does not end commitment; it deepens perspective.
- Networks sustain hope: Collaboration across borders empowers those still at risk.
- Purpose transforms pain: Rebuilding life through service gives suffering meaning

Recognition of Academic and Professional Credentials

In exile, you may find that your education, professional experience, or achievements from your home country aren’t recognized. If you left in haste, you might lack physical proof of your credentials. Even with documentation, your degree could be invalid or rejected. Many factors affect recognition—such as the prominence of your university. Degrees from local or community colleges are often dismissed, while those from well-known institutions have better chances. In many cases, you may need to repeat your education, but thorough research can save time and money. Here are some steps you can make to start the process of recognition:

1. If you have diplomas or transcripts, safeguard them immediately.
2. Once you confirm proof of completion, assess their potential for acceptance.
3. Seek free legal or educational advice from NGOs like RET International, HIAS, or UNHCR.
4. Migrant groups may also offer guidance based on shared experience.
5. Be prepared: credential recognition often involves costly translations, complex requirements, unclear instructions, and possible discrimination. Planning ahead can reduce confusion and stress. Note that specialized degrees—like law—typically

require retraining.

Access to Employment and Economic Opportunities

You may have gone from being a respected leader or professional to an unemployed unknown. You should approach life like a fresh graduate—ready to begin. After prison’s deprivation, this is your chance to pursue your dreams.

Case Study: Rebuilding Life from the Ground Up

In the aftermath of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, former political prisoner Myo Yan Naung Thein and his wife were forced to flee their homeland. Once a prominent figure in Myanmar’s political and civil society landscape, Yan Naung and his wife arrived in the United States with little more than determination and resilience.

Starting from scratch, the couple took on any work they could find—food delivery, restaurant shifts, and construction jobs. These roles, though far removed from their previous professional lives, were essential stepping stones in their new reality.

Despite the demanding nature of their jobs, they remained committed to advocacy. Yan Naung spoke at local universities, collaborated on research projects, and stayed connected with Burmese activists still in Myanmar—often sacrificing sleep to maintain these ties.

Their persistence paid off. They leveraged community resources and gradually transitioned into academic life, enrolling in accounting programs at a local university. The couple hope to be able to use their new degrees to build a more stable career in their city. All the while, they continue to stay involved in their country’s struggle for liberation, waiting for an opportunity to return to their home country.

Key Takeaways

- **Accepting Where You Are:** Yan Naung and his wife embraced low-skilled jobs without shame. They understood

that rebuilding begins with humility and hard work.

- **Don't Dwell on the Past:** Rather than mourning their former status, they focused on the present and future—treating life as a fresh start.
- **Stay Connected to Your Purpose:** Advocacy remained central to their identity. Even while working long hours, they found ways to contribute to the cause they believed in.
- **Use Every Resource Available:** From community support to university programs, they tapped into local networks and opportunities to move forward.
- **Education Is a Bridge:** Returning to school helped them regain professional momentum and opened doors to new career paths.
- **Resilience Is a Daily Practice:** Their journey wasn't linear or easy, but step by step, they built a new life with dignity and purpose.

When you are job hunting, tap into every available network. Ask family, friends, or diaspora contacts for referrals. If you lack support, visit public spaces like libraries, which often share job postings, workshops, and networking events. You should research employment laws carefully—especially work permit requirements and the risks of working without one. To access better opportunities, it is recommended to:

1. Apply for work authorization as soon as possible. Sometimes having a refugee or asylum status can speed up the process of obtaining a work permit.
 2. Train yourself in high-in-demand skills. Some NGOs offer free courses in areas such as sales, IT, languages, and customer service.
 3. Look for remote jobs. Platforms like Upwork, Freelancer, or Fiverr allow you to offer digital services. Some of these platforms might only offer opportunities for certain languages, so be mindful of that.
 4. Turn to organizations that provide job placements. For example, HIAS, RET, ACAI, Fundación Mujer, among others.
- Another ethical and legitimate path is professionalizing your story. Charging for talks, workshops, interviews, or books—when done with honesty and care—is valid. Your testimony is intellectual

labor; it educates, inspires, and can support your family.

Practical steps for professionalizing your story:

- Define your focus. Clarify topics, formats, and length; prepare a short speaker profile.
- Establish fair conditions. Honoraria and travel support are standard; if you wish, offer reduced rates for grassroots groups or donate a portion—by your choice, not by pressure.
- Protect well-being and safety. Set boundaries on what you share; request simple agreements in writing (recording, data use); coordinate basic security with hosts.
- If you maintain connections to international organizations, some donors may support you from abroad. These opportunities are rare but possible if you tell your story clearly and cast a wide net.

Talking About Your Experience in Interviews or Job Applications

Sharing your experience as a former political prisoner can be a double-edged sword—admired in some contexts, viewed with suspicion in others. Some companies avoid politically exposed persons (PEPs) due to perceived risks. You control your narrative and don't need to disclose everything. In some interviews, it's better to focus on your skills. When you do speak, do so with dignity, not raw trauma.

First, acknowledge the impact of trauma. Many former prisoners struggle to speak openly—flashbacks, anxiety, shame, and fear of being misunderstood are common. This is normal. If talking about your detention destabilizes you, it is acceptable to:

- Use brief, factual language (“arbitrarily detained for X months; released on [date] without conviction”) and pivot to skills.
- Prepare a short script in advance and practice it with a counselor, mentor, or trusted friend.
- Set boundaries in an interview (“I prefer to focus on the competencies I bring to this role”).
- Seek professional support to process the story at your own pace; healing is not a performance.

Chances are, there may be more organizations in your country of exile that can appreciate and admire the values of integrity, struggle, and consistency in your experience. Speaking calmly and succinctly helps them see that.

Case Study: Professionalizing Advocacy Gaps

Anaïse Kanimba and her sister Carine stopped working for around two years to focus on the campaign for the release of their father, Paul Rusesabagina. Their father was released in 2023, and the campaign was finally concluded. Some time afterward, Anaïse was finally ready to return to the job market. Anaïse had employers ask her what she did during those two years—which was hard to articulate to an employer who didn't understand the political context of Rwanda and her father's struggle. Anaïse came up with an idea to create a LinkedIn page about their campaign. She put campaign leader as her position, and translated her experiences of advocating for her father into professional skills.

It wasn't like she spent her past two years doing nothing; it was just that she needed to speak in a way that employers could understand. In the past two years, she gained so much experience in communicating, organizing, planning, coordinating, negotiating... She developed the skills to navigate the complex landscape of international organizations, government bureaucracies, the press, and more. This was no easy feat. The experience she has gained is valuable and very relevant in business settings. She found that by explaining her work using professional language, it helped her reclaim pieces of her story and identity. Her experience campaigning for her father isn't a gap in her resume; it didn't happen in a vacuum—it's a part of her life story and journey.

From Kanimba's story, it was not about her actual story, but rather about how she talked about it and professionalized it.

Key Takeaways:

- Lead with skills and outcomes. Add a brief, neutral line about detention only if relevant or asked.
- Keep a facts-only sentence ready (duration, lack of conviction,

recognition as political) and pivot back to competencies.

- Include one credible link (personal site or human-rights document) on your résumé or portfolio for context.
- If an employer shows concern, offer your one-page case brief and references who can speak to integrity and performance.
- Protect your energy: if a conversation turns prying or disrespectful, it is acceptable to pause or decline to continue.

It's easy to overlook your own experience as a former political prisoner or advocate. Employers may do the same. Imposter syndrome may creep in, but stay confident—your survival and resilience make you as qualified, if not more, than many others.

Reputational Harm and Hostile “Digital Footprints”

A real and delicate issue: many former political prisoners face smear campaigns after release. Authoritarian regimes flood the internet with false accusations, framing you as a criminal rather than a victim. In exile, employers unfamiliar with your country's context may assume the worst. While you can't erase the internet, you can create a paper trail—documents and references that clarify your story without forcing you to relive trauma in every conversation.

You can proactively anchor the truth by:

- **Public reference page.** If appropriate, work with allies to create or improve a Wikipedia page or a personal website that clearly summarizes your case, timeline, and peaceful activities, linking to credible sources.
- **Authoritative documents.** Keep digital and printed copies of relevant opinions by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, court records showing dismissal or lack of conviction, and letters from reputable human-rights organizations recognizing your case as political.
- **Professional one-pager.** Prepare a concise case brief (one page): who you are, what happened (one paragraph), what you do now, and two or three links to high-credibility sources. Share it only when needed.
- **References who can vouch.** Identify two or three professional





Chapter 10



FIGHTING AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

What is TNR? It's when governments target people abroad—through online harassment, spyware, pressure on relatives, forced returns, and, in extreme cases, physical attacks or assassination attempts. Freedom House has documented hundreds of cases across 100+ countries. China is a leading perpetrator, alongside Belarus, Russia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Some campaigns have turned deadly, as seen in attempts on Masih Alinejad's life in New York.

Exile may remove you from prison, but not from the regime's reach. Surveillance, harassment, smear campaigns, and threats often continue across borders. For former political prisoners, this complicates efforts to study, work, and live with dignity. At the World Liberty Congress (WLC), this is lived reality—President Masih Alinejad has survived multiple transnational plots, and hundreds of members report similar intimidation. Speaking openly about TNR is protective; awareness enables calm, deliberate defense.

In 2025, the G7 condemned TNR as foreign interference and activated its Rapid Response Mechanism. In the U.S., TNR is treated as both a national security and civil rights threat.

For those in exile, knowing where to find resources and support is critical:

- In the United States, the FBI has created a specialized unit to investigate TNR. Victims are encouraged to report threats, surveillance, or harassment directly. Documentation—screenshots, messages, license plates—can become part of an official case.
- The Department of Justice (DOJ) also prosecutes TNR cases when foreign actors violate U.S. law, as seen in recent convictions linked to Iranian plots.
- The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) at the State Department funds programs and supports organizations worldwide that help victims of TNR and advocate for systemic protections.
- Internationally, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) coordinates member states to detect and counter foreign interference, including TNR, offering another layer of visibility and diplomatic pressure.

How to respond in practice:

- Recognize and record. Treat strange messages, online impersonations, or suspicious contacts as possible threats. Keep a log and preserve evidence.
- Report early. Share incidents with trusted NGOs and, if you are in the U.S., with the FBI or local authorities. Early reporting builds a protective paper trail.
- Reduce exposure. Limit location sharing, delay travel posts, and meet in institutional spaces when possible.
- Strengthen digital security. Use strong authentication, password managers, and clean devices for sensitive work. Disable default location sharing and scrub photo metadata.
- Protect family. Do not involve relatives in risky tasks such as carrying sensitive data; instead, share simple digital hygiene practices with them.

- Seek cover and allies. Act and speak through organizations—such as WLC, NGOs, or universities—to shift focus from the individual to the collective and to access institutional protection.
- Escalate wisely. If harassment escalates, seek legal support, protective orders, and raise your case with allies who can use diplomatic and multilateral channels like the G7 RRM.

TNR seeks to silence and isolate, but more governments and institutions now recognize it as an attack on human rights and democracy. By documenting incidents, reporting early, and using resources—from the FBI and DOJ to DRL and the G7’s Rapid Response Mechanism—former political prisoners can blunt its impact. For WLC members and allies, TNR awareness isn’t alarmism; it’s essential safety. It ensures exile becomes not a place of fear, but a platform for freedom and voice.

Financial Access After Release

Financial exclusion is a widespread but often overlooked hardship for former political prisoners. Even with few assets, many find the banking system used against them—accounts closed, transfers blocked, pensions withheld, and “suspicious activity” flags that follow them across institutions. This occurs both at home and in exile, where the impact is often worse: without a bank account, you can’t rent, earn a salary, pay taxes, or rebuild a normal life. We address it here because it’s recurring, large-scale, and solvable.

There’s a double bind: being labeled a politically exposed person (PEP) triggers extra scrutiny, while coming from a sanctioned country leads to “de-risking”—banks closing accounts rather than reviewing complex cases. The paradox is stark: persecuted by an authoritarian regime, sanctioned by the international community, and yet penalized again for your origin and status. In extreme cases, regimes exploit Interpol notices or flood the internet with disinformation, creating a hostile “adverse media” trail. This is known as transnational financial repression, documented by civil society groups like the Open Dialogue Foundation and explored in *How Dictators Use Your Money*. The message is clear: financial exclusion is not inevitable; there are ways to fight back.

Practical Path to Being Banked

1) Build a small “compliance file.”

You should walk into the bank prepared. A tight, credible packet can turn a “no” into a “let’s review this.”

- **Identity & status:** passport or government ID; proof of legal status in the host country; proof of address (lease, utility bill, letter from shelter/NGO where accepted).
- **One-page case brief:** who you are; dates of detention/release; no conviction (if applicable); current occupation/study; two or three links to reputable sources (e.g., UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention opinions, respected human-rights statements, serious media).
- **Letters of support:** from a recognized human-rights organization, a university, an employer, or a faith/community leader who can vouch for your integrity and explain the political context.
- **Income & source-of-funds:** simple CV, offer letter or contract if you have one, invoices/honoraria, or a brief note explaining expected transfers (who pays you, for what, approximate amounts).
- **Consistency kit:** ensure your name, dates, spellings, and documents align across languages; bring certified translations where needed.

One former prisoner had three accounts closed in a row after screening systems flagged his detention history. With a short dossier and a support letter from a well-known human-rights NGO, he secured a meeting with a compliance officer; the bank opened a new account under enhanced monitoring. Paperwork—and a credible ally—made the difference.

2) Ask for the right meeting.

When you apply, **request a compliance review** up front (“I understand I may be categorized as a PEP; I would like to provide context and documents”). Be transparent and calm. Offer reasonable mitigations (lower transaction limits at first;

domestic-only card; no cash deposits over a set threshold).

3) Choose the right institution.

- Community banks/credit unions often have more flexibility than large multinationals.
- Fintech/payment institutions (licensed, regulated) can be a bridge while you pursue a full bank account.
- If one branch refuses, try another within the same network—local discretion varies.

4) Document every decision.

If you are refused or closed, ask for the reason in writing (or at least the policy basis) and keep all correspondence. It can help on appeal, with an ombudsman, or when trying elsewhere.

5) Clean your public footprint—proactively.

You cannot erase the internet, but you can anchor the truth: a modest website (or neutral Wikipedia entry) summarizing your peaceful activities and linking to reputable sources; a concise LinkedIn summary; and consistent bios help counter adverse-media hits that appear in bank screening.

6) Clear abuse when possible.

If you suspect an abusive Interpol notice or fabricated charges, consult counsel about pathways to challenge or annotate them. Clearing false flags removes major obstacles to onboarding.

7) Stay inside the law.

Never misrepresent your identity, status, or sources of funds. Compliance is protection: being truthful and organized builds trust and keeps you safe.

If, despite best efforts, you remain unbanked we do not advise giving up. Keep trying periodically—laws and risk policies change, and a new letter or contract can tip the balance.

Financial Freedom Through New Technologies

Dictators now use technology to spy, to silence, and to break the bonds of solidarity. But in that same digital space lives the power to set us free. When we use technology to protect privacy, defend truth, and restore trust, we turn it into a force for dignity. Bitcoin is part of that quiet revolution—a reminder that even in the darkest systems of control, freedom still finds a signal.

If lawful banking access is unavailable, decentralized tools like Bitcoin can serve as a last-resort bridge to receive modest support, pay essentials, or safeguard value. These systems don't rely on banks or governments, and small, well-secured balances are harder to freeze. Bitcoin is a decentralized digital currency that allows global transactions without bank or government approval. If you control your private keys, no authority can confiscate your funds. It's also seen as a store of value, protected from inflation and currency devaluation. For former political prisoners facing financial restrictions, Bitcoin offers a path to independence and protection. Even if you're new to it, start small, learn the basics, and explore how it can help you rebuild with dignity.

Safety first: Start with very small amounts, seek training, and follow legal guidance in your host country—especially around taxes, reporting, and consumer protection. Mistakes like lost keys or scams can be costly.

Step 1: Creating and Safeguarding Your Digital Wallet

The first step in using Bitcoin is choosing a wallet. For daily use and easy setup, mobile wallets are best—especially in places where cryptocurrency is formalized. If you prefer occasional exchanges from a secure location, use a desktop wallet installed on your personal computer. For larger amounts and offline storage, choose a hardware wallet. It should be kept in a secure, private place and not carried around, making it less convenient than the other options.

It's better to choose a non-custodial wallet if possible. Once your wallet is set up it will generate your private keys,—represented by a 12 or 24-word recovery phrase. These keys give you full control of your Bitcoin.

It's best to start by receiving a small amount to practice and get comfortable.

To keep your account secure:

- Avoid untrusted custodians: if someone else or a platform controls your keys, they can freeze or seize your funds.
- Do not share your private keys with anyone.
- Write it down and make sure it is stored somewhere that will survive fire, water, or theft if possible.
- Do not lose your recovery phrase. If you lose your recovery phrase, you will permanently lose access to your Bitcoin. No bank or company can restore it for you.

Step 2: Receiving International Payments or Remittances

If using cryptocurrency to receive payments, share only your receiving address—never your recovery phrase. Bitcoin can arrive within minutes, without bank approval. For small, fast transactions, consider the Lightning Network. Use trusted communication channels and change your receiving address periodically for added security. For secure messaging tips, see Chapter 2's Digital Security Subsection.

Step 3: Converting Bitcoin Safely into Local Currency

To exchange Bitcoin for cash via peer-to-peer transactions, first verify the trustworthiness of the individual or business. In repressive environments, prioritize discretion and safety. Avoid publicly revealing you hold Bitcoin. In exile, formal exchanges may be available—if so, bring valid ID and follow local regulations.

Step 4: Using Cryptocurrency in your Home Country or in Exile

In your home country, using cryptocurrency may carry legal risks if banned or monitored. Regimes may block platforms or shut down internet access, forcing reliance on peer-to-peer networks. In exile, access to exchanges and formal conversion is more likely, with reduced legal and internet risks. If Bitcoin is widely accepted, you can integrate it into savings or investments.

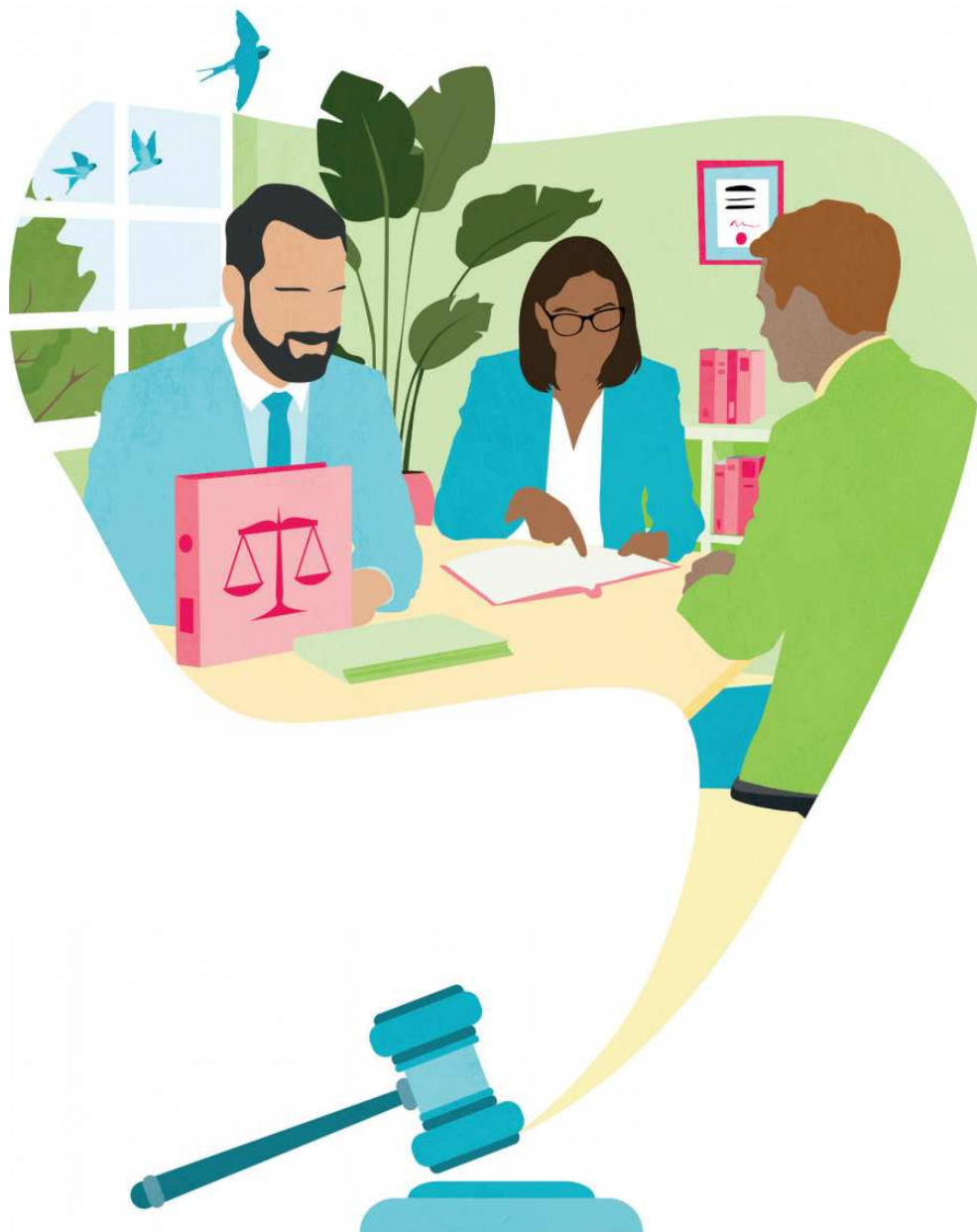
Note: Bitcoin is not anonymous by design, is pseudonymous. Transactions can be traced. Use privacy tools (e.g., CoinJoin, PayJoin) and separate wallets for different purposes to protect your identity.

Legal Harassment by Regime Proxies

Another way in which authoritarian regimes extend transnational repression is by weaponizing the legal system itself. Through lawsuits filed abroad—often by proxies or individuals acting on their behalf—they seek not to win in court, but to drain the dissident's emotional and financial resources. This tactic, sometimes called lawfare, aims to intimidate, silence, or bankrupt those who speak out.

If you ever receive notice of a lawsuit or legal threat, seek a lawyer familiar with these forms of harassment and with tools such as anti-SLAPP motions—legal mechanisms designed to quickly dismiss lawsuits intended to silence free expression. Understanding that the regime's objective is not justice but exhaustion is key to protecting your resources and peace of mind.

My Personal Notes



Chapter 11

NAVIGATING LEGAL PROCESSES

Your past as a political prisoner (or your connection to one) doesn't take away your human rights. You're still free to express yourself peacefully. If you're in a vulnerable situation, you might get extra protection to ensure your rights are respected. When rights are violated, the government must:

- Stop the harmful actions right away
- Make sure it doesn't happen again, and
- Provide access to reparations.

Unfortunately, the challenges might not end when you're released from prison. Even when you're free, the harassment might not stop. You could find it hard to get back into political activities, and there might be unfair limits on your money or property. Your safety and freedom could still be at risk. In some cases, you might even have to leave your country, which could bring a whole new set of problems. You might struggle to find a new home or could lose your citizenship.

The ways to deal with these problems might vary depending on where you live. On a global level, you might be able to use different international systems to help you. For example, if you're in Europe, you could use world-wide systems like those of the United Nations, or regional ones like the European Court of Human Rights. This chapter won't list all the options or tell you exactly what to do. But learning

about these different systems can help you figure out your next steps.

There are two main types of ways to get help:

- **Rapid Response Mechanisms:** These are for when you think something bad might happen soon. You can ask for protection right away. They don't decide who's at fault or make anyone pay for damages. They just try to keep you safe.
- **Dispute Resolution Procedures:** These look into what happened when someone says their rights were violated. Both sides share their story and evidence. A neutral person or group decides who's right. They can also decide if someone needs to make up for the harm they caused.

There are two main places where you can seek justice: in your own country or internationally. Here's a quick breakdown of the types of legal processes that may be useful in your case, categorized based on the type of mechanism and the jurisdiction (domestic vs. international):

	Domestic	International
Rapid response	Relief resources, Early warning mechanisms, Complaints before ombudsman offices and national human rights commissions, Requests before domestic programs for safeguarding journalists and human rights defenders under threat	Precautionary measures before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Provisional measures before the African Court on Human Rights, Urgent actions before the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, Urgent appeals before UN Special Procedures
Substantive Decision	Criminal proceedings, Constitutional actions, Torts and other civil actions, Administrative proceedings	Individual Communications before UN Committees, Petitions before the IACHR, Applications before the European Court of Human Rights, Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure

If you believe that an international process is appropriate or necessary, it is essential to remember that there are limitations on the complaints that international bodies may hear.

The **golden rule** is that you have to try getting help in your own country first, before taking your case to an international body. This is called “exhausting domestic remedies.”

However, there are exceptions to this rule if:

- The government is unwilling or unable to provide a proper legal process for you. For example, if there is political interference or the system is too weak.
- The domestic remedies available are ineffective and don't properly address the problem.
- There are unreasonable delays in resolving your issue through the internal system.
- The internal legal process doesn't follow fair procedures.
- You are prevented from accessing or using the domestic remedies.

In these cases, you may be able to skip the step of trying remedies in your own country and go directly to international options instead. The key is showing that the domestic system is not working properly for your situation. This can help you bypass the usual requirement to exhaust all domestic options first.

Note: ‘Rapid response mechanisms’ are aimed at preventing urgent threats, they usually don't require proving you tried domestic options first.

It's important to look closely at your specific situation and needs when deciding how to get help.

You'll need to make a plan that takes into account:

- What resources are available to you
- What legal help you might need
- Your personal circumstances, whether you're in your home country or in exile

- The risks involved in taking legal action

To prepare this plan, as the person seeking help, you should make sure you have a few key things in place:

- Know your rights, both the main rights and the procedures for enforcing them
- Gather any documents or evidence that support your claims
- Identify the organizations or institutions that can help you access the justice system
- Understand where your case should be filed - the right court, committee, or other venue

Taking the time to get these elements together will help you develop an effective strategy tailored to your unique situation. This increases your chances of success in getting the help and remedies you need. The remainder of this chapter will provide you with information and guidance on the following core issues: accessing legal representation, vulnerable migratory statuses (for example, exile, refugee status and statelessness), information and evidence documentation, and reparations for human rights violations. Put together, the information in the following chapters is meant to provide a high-level overview of the key legal elements that you should consider as you continue to pursue justice.

Access to Legal Representation

The type of legal help you need will depend on what you're trying to achieve. Different legal processes may require different kinds of representation. For example, a lawyer who works for a government legal aid program may not be able to take your case to an international court. And the legal help you need for urgent protection may be different from what's required to seek accountability or get compensation. Some claims can only be made through the legal system in your own country, so you'd need a lawyer licensed to practice there.

Here are some common types of legal representation available at both the domestic and international levels:

Ombudsman Institutions: can provide a type of quasi-legal help that may be useful in certain situations. They can assist you by:

- Allowing you to file complaints with administrative bodies
- Documenting abuses, collecting evidence, and investigating individual cases
- Monitoring whether human rights laws are being followed and advocating for reparations
- Mediating between you and government agencies
- Advocating for changes to policies and laws
- Helping you access legal services and other assistance

These institutions are often called “Defensoría del Pueblo” in Latin America or “national human rights institutions” in other regions. They are meant to be easy for the public to use as a way to bridge the gap between citizens and the government.

However, there are some limitations to the support ombudsman institutions can provide:

- They may not be able to directly file cases on your behalf in front of tribunals, even if they can support your claims there.
- In some countries, these institutions may be underfunded or lack independence from the government, making it hard for them to effectively support claims against the state.

Note: while ombudsman institutions can be a useful resource, the level of help they can offer may depend on the specific institution and the circumstances in your country.

Legal Aid: If the ombudsman institution in your country can't provide the support you need, you may be able to get help from a legal aid organization instead. Legal aid is assistance for people who can't normally afford legal representation. These organizations can provide:

- Legal advice and counseling
- Direct legal representation
- Advocacy on your behalf

Some legal aid groups focus on specific issues, like free speech or

arbitrary detentions, that may be relevant to your case. Legal aid can come from the government or from non-profit organizations. While they sometimes interact with international processes, legal aid programs are generally more focused on the legal system within your own country.

In some cases, an ombudsman office may even refer you to a legal aid group that can provide the direct legal representation your situation requires. The key is finding a legal aid organization that can address the particular needs of your case, whether that's through advice, representation, or advocacy.

State-Mandated Free Legal Aid & State Legal Aid Providers: Many countries have some form of legal aid services that are administered or funded by the government. This can take a few different forms:

- Direct government provision of legal aid services through state institutions.
- The government providing funding to non-profit organizations to deliver legal aid.

The specific type of assistance these state-backed legal aid programs can provide often depends on the legal process involved. For example, they may be more likely to help with domestic legal matters rather than international ones.

In most countries, the government is more likely to guarantee legal aid for criminal proceedings than for civil cases. Some countries may have laws that provide legal aid for certain types of civil or administrative cases as well. However, the availability of state-provided legal aid can vary a lot depending on where you are. It often comes down to the specific laws and policies in your jurisdiction.

Even when state-backed legal aid is available, there may be limitations, such as:

- Funding cuts or political interference that undermine the program
- Eligibility rules based on your citizenship or immigration status

Note: while state-mandated or state-funded legal aid can be an important resource, the details of what it can provide will depend on your particular situation and location.

Non-Profit Legal Aid: If state-sponsored legal aid is not available, you can look to independent non-profit organizations as a valuable alternative source of legal assistance. These non-profit legal aid programs often focus more on civil legal processes, compared to government programs that tend to prioritize criminal cases. The advantage of non-profit legal aid is that these organizations may have more expertise, flexibility, and willingness to engage with a wider range of international legal mechanisms.

Pro bono Legal Representation: Additionally, in countries like the United States and United Kingdom, you can look to a culture of pro bono legal work, where lawyers and law firms voluntarily provide free or reduced-cost representation, particularly for victims of human rights abuses. This pro bono support can extend beyond domestic issues to also assist individuals navigating complex international justice processes, such as regional courts or UN treaty bodies. When state-sponsored options are limited, you should explore pro bono legal representation as an important alternative avenue for obtaining the legal assistance your case may require.

Asylum, refugee status, residency, or other forms of protection

If your case involves or potentially involves displacement, it is important that you have a general understanding of migration statuses and processes. Protected status offers key rights: to remain in the country, avoid forced return (non-refoulement), access work, education, healthcare, and pursue permanent residency or citizenship.

Until naturalization is complete, former political prisoners retain their original citizenship. This legal limbo can expose them to diplomatic pressure, travel limits, and continued surveillance—even in exile.

Citizenship and Migration Statuses:

- **Refugee Status and Asylum.** If you leave your country because you're scared of being harmed due to your race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or social group, you might be a refugee. This means you're unable to count on your home country's protection. Refugee status is your migratory status, while asylum is the legal protection another country gives you. If you decide to go back to your home country or use its protections again, you could lose refugee status.
- **Complementary & Humanitarian Protections.** Even if you're not officially a refugee, you might still face serious risks. Some countries offer legal protections in these cases. These can include special visas or permissions that let you stay if deporting you would breach international rules against sending people back into danger. It's important to ask about these options in the country you're currently in.
- **Temporary Protected Statuses & Emergency Visas.** Some laws temporarily protect people who are at risk because of war or being unfairly targeted in their home country. It's important to get legal advice to see if you qualify for these protections where you are.
- **Residency via Statelessness or Special Circumstances.** If you lose your citizenship or are denied nationality, your migration process might be tougher. Some countries help stateless people by offering legal residency, which lets you live, work, and access essential services. Other countries might offer informal help. You should find out if local laws can protect you. International agreements outline the rights of stateless individuals, which many countries follow.

The type of migration status you should aim for depends on both the country's laws where you're applying and your situation. To start, document any rights violations and get legal help. With your lawyer, you'll need to decide on the best pathway. You should ask these questions:

- What options are available in this legal system?
- Do you qualify as a refugee?
- Are you experiencing statelessness?
- Are there other ways to gain protected status?

Generally, when seeking migration status in a new country, you should expect

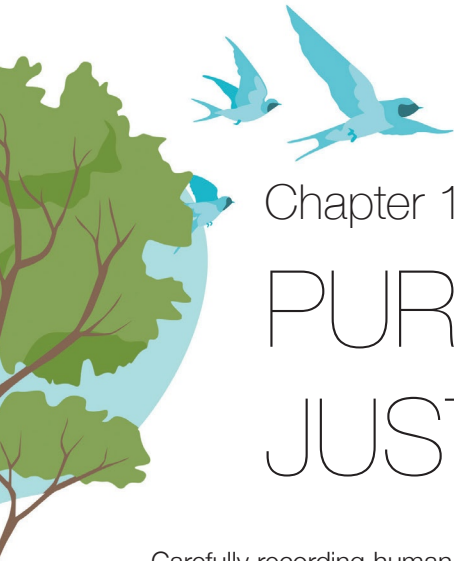
- **Submitting Applications.** Apply to the national authority, usually an immigration agency, for your desired status.
- **Preparing Testimony and Evidence.** Gather and submit all necessary documents to support your case.
- **Interviews and Hearings.** Be ready for interviews or hearings where you'll share your story with officials.
- **Adjudication.** Authorities will review your application and evidence to decide if you're eligible.
- **Appeals or Reapplications.** If your application is denied, you might have the chance to appeal or apply again with new information.

Consider reaching out to these organizations for help:

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They can determine refugee status in countries not signed up to the Refugee Convention, or where processes aren't available. For issues with statelessness, they work with governments and NGOs to help. Check their website or your local UNHCR office for more support.

International Organization for Migration (IOM). This UN-related group focuses on migration and has offices worldwide for migrants needing help. They also assist with family reunification.





Chapter 12

PURSUING JUSTICE

Carefully recording human rights violations is very important for seeking justice—either in your country or internationally. It's vital to preserve all records related to arrest, release, and care—such as medical reports, photos, statements, court records, release certificates, psychological care records, and others. These are personal, irreplaceable pieces of evidence that should be stored securely, with both physical and digital copies.

Being precise and thorough increases your chances of success when making complaints. Having a good plan that includes collecting strong evidence and following proper procedures is key.

The first step is to understand why you're documenting and who will see or use this information. This helps decide how and what to record. Your documentation should create a clear picture of what happened.

Ask yourself:

- **Who?** Who was involved? Victims, perpetrators, police, prison staff, private people, etc.
- **What?** What exactly happened? Describe the actions, methods, legal background, and any legal steps or accusations.
- **Where?** The exact location of the incident -street, police station,

court, jail, home, or workplace.

- **When?** The date, time, and year when the event took place.
- **Why?** Why did it happen? Especially if your victim status (like being a political prisoner) is relevant.

For international complaints, you need detailed and clear facts, even if it's hard to gather this information. Good reporting includes specific details about what was done, not just vague words like "torture" or "abuse." Avoid making assumptions, using emotional language, or unsupported claims, as these can weaken your case.

Collect information systematically. Make a checklist of what you need and add to it as you gather more details. Be sure to present everything in order, clearly and simply. Number your paragraphs and cross-reference if needed. Include supporting documents like police reports or medical records with your petition.

Your investigation should cover:

- How serious and what type of violation it was
- Whether it was a one-time event or part of a pattern
- Who was affected, including communities
- What actions others (government or NGOs) have taken in response

Collecting and Categorizing Evidence

Supporting documents can include many things: copies of local laws, witness statements, police reports, court decisions, photos, medical and mental health reports, and autopsy reports if relevant. If you cannot get some of these documents, explain why.

Evidence can be of two types:

- 1. Direct Evidence:** These are firsthand accounts, like victims' or witnesses' stories. They give important details about what happened and can show if similar violations happen to others.
 - a. Documents:** Physical proof like police reports, court records, medical files, or photos of injuries help tell your story.

- 2. Circumstantial Evidence:** These are indirect signs that support

your case. For example, family members describing your condition after the incident or reports from witnesses who saw what happened.

3. Media Reports: News articles can add useful details but should be supported by direct evidence whenever possible.

Make sure to organize all evidence clearly, include the most relevant documents, and explain if any are missing. If you need to submit original documents to an international organization or body, you should ensure that certified copies or photographs of each document are kept. Official records are likely to be archived and cannot be retrieved later. This precaution is essential, as these same documents may be needed later in refugee, political asylum, or reparation proceedings, or to demonstrate continued persecution.

Navigating International Complaints Mechanisms

When you submit a human rights complaint to international organizations, it's helpful to check the tips listed in the footnotes of Table 1. Each organization may have its own forms and rules, but the important information needed is usually similar.

Even if you don't use their specific forms, your complaint can still be considered if it includes all the essential details.

To make your submission strong and complete, include:

- **Your details:** Name, nationality, date of birth, address, and email.
- **The country accused:** The name of the country where the violation happened.
- **A clear timeline:** A step-by-step account of what happened.
- **How the facts relate to laws:** Explain how the events break international human rights treaties.
- **Which rights were violated:** Clearly state what rights you believe were broken.
- **What you want:** Specify the remedies or solutions you are seeking.
- **What has been done:** Show what steps you've taken

inside your country to seek justice. If you couldn't do so or the government refused to help, explain why.

- **Other submissions:** Mention if you've already sent your case to other international bodies or if it's still under review elsewhere.
- **Supporting documents:** Attach copies of all evidence that supports your case.

Keep your claims clear and based on strong facts. Paying attention to what each process requires increases your chances of success.

Take note of these three guides which provide detailed advice on how to write effective human rights complaints:

- **Writing A Human Rights Claim from Redress:** This guide provides detailed training on how to make strong and convincing claims.
- **Litigation Practice Note by the Open Society Justice Initiative:** This document offers practical tips for writing legal cases.
- **Guidelines for Civil Society Organizations on Cooperation with the ICC from Eurojust and the ICC:** Even though it covers more than human rights claims, this guide gives helpful ideas on preparing submissions for international criminal courts.

These resources can help you understand how to organize your claim and make it more effective.

The Istanbul Protocol: If you are documenting torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, you can consult the Istanbul Protocol as another resource. This international manual lays out medical and legal guidelines for investigating and documenting such abuses. It also offers background on relevant legal norms and standards. The protocol also offers criteria for how to assess consistency between allegations of torture and your evidence—medical or psychological findings. By knowing the criteria, you can structure and present evidence more effectively for investigations, interviews, and legal cases. You can find the Istanbul Protocol online for free download through a simple search.

Pursuing Reparations

States have a responsibility to provide reparations when your human rights have been violated. If you are a family member of a political prisoner and have been harmed while helping victims or trying to stop violations, international bodies might recognize you as a victim too. However, the type of harm is important.

Some countries may not acknowledge damages that happen indirectly (harms that are a consequence of the main violation). For example, being detained unfairly may also cause other rights violations, but the direct harm of detention itself is usually more relevant when seeking compensation.

Depending on the situation, reparations can come through court cases, settlements, constitutional mechanisms, or international human rights bodies.

Types of Reparations:

- **Restitution:** This means trying to put you back in the situation you were in before the violation. Complete restitution isn't always possible, but sometimes your property can be returned, or your employment or civil rights restored. For example, if your property was taken unfairly, restitution would mean getting it back.
- **Compensation:** This is money awarded for damages. It can cover medical and psychological care, lost income, injury, or damage to your reputation. You can ask for compensation if you faced physical or emotional harm, lost your job, or were unfairly stigmatized.
- **Satisfaction:** This involves official recognition that a wrong was done. It can include public apologies, official statements acknowledging what happened, or ceremonies honoring victims. Court judgments may also recognize the injustice, or truth-telling processes can reveal what really happened.
- **Justice:** Holding those responsible accountable through investigations and criminal prosecutions is key. Justice helps prevent future violations and shows responsibility. It can uncover facts about wrongful detention or torture and bring perpetrators to justice.
- **Truth:** Understanding what really occurred, such as the details

of detentions, the identities of those responsible, or the fate of missing persons, is an essential part of justice. This can be achieved through truth commissions, official investigations, and testimonies from survivors, all of which help reveal the facts.

- **Rehabilitation:** This means helping victims recover mentally, physically, legally, and socially. It can include medical care, counseling, legal help, and social support. For former political prisoners, this might mean clearing their criminal records, restoring their voting rights, or helping them reintegrate into society.

- **Guarantees of Non-Repetition:** To prevent future violations, countries can change laws, educate security forces about human rights, and set up independent bodies to monitor detention practices. These steps are meant to fix the causes of violations so they don't happen again.

Case Study: Reparations in Chile After Dictatorship

Following the end of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, thousands of former political prisoners and torture survivors sought recognition and redress. For years, survivors faced silence and denial. But persistent advocacy by victims' associations eventually led to the creation of the Valech Commission (2003–2005).

The Commission's findings became the basis for a reparations program. Survivors recognized by the Commission were entitled to a modest monthly pension that was less than minimum wage. Victims would also receive health, education and housing benefits. The program did not provide full financial compensation, nor did it prosecute all perpetrators, many of whom remained unpunished. Yet the measures represented an official acknowledgment of suffering and a concrete form of support that improved survivors' quality of life.

Key Takeaways:

- Persistence pays off. Survivors' associations lobbied for years before the state acknowledged their rights. Collective organization was key.
- Reparations are multidimensional. Financial pensions

were accompanied by healthcare and educational benefits, addressing both economic and social needs.

- Symbolic recognition matters. Public acknowledgment of crimes validated survivors' dignity, even when prosecutions remained limited.
- Imperfect justice is still progress. While many perpetrators escaped accountability, the reparations program offered tangible support and historical recognition.

The Chilean case demonstrates that long-term justice is rarely immediate or complete. It is achieved through sustained advocacy, documentation, and collective resilience. For survivors of political imprisonment worldwide, it offers proof that even decades after release, justice—though imperfect—remains possible.



Chapter 13

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Navigating life after political imprisonment is complex and dangerous. Beyond physical recovery, former prisoners often face deep psychological trauma—PTSD, anxiety, and the pain of separation from loved ones. Many must make the difficult decision to leave their home country for safety, a move filled with legal and personal risks. For this reason, we offer a list of organizations and resources for support.

This information may change due to shifting political conditions. Always verify whether a program, grant, or service is still available. Acceptance isn't guaranteed—eligibility depends on specific criteria, not personal merit. Rejection can feel discouraging, but persistence and staying informed increase your chances. If denied, ask for referrals to other programs. International systems are complex, but knowledge opens doors.

The Role of the United Nations and International/Inter-Regional Bodies

No international body can grant protection status unilaterally; only national governments have that authority. However, UN agencies, international organizations, and NGOs play a vital role in supporting former political prisoners through legal, logistical, and protective aid.

Though former prisoners may still hold their home country's passport, using it or returning remains unsafe. This highlights the importance of organizations that help bridge the gap from persecution to protection.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): This group is the single most important UN body for former political prisoners seeking protection. While it doesn't grant asylum itself, it has the mandate to protect refugees and is instrumental in the asylum process.

Legal Support: The UNHCR provides legal assistance and guidance to individuals fleeing persecution. They can help a former prisoner register as a person of concern and work with host governments to facilitate the asylum process. Their official recognition of a person as a "refugee" is a critical first step.

Protection Status: The UNHCR can't directly grant asylum, as that is a sovereign act of a state. However, it is the primary authority for determining who is a refugee. Based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, a person can be considered a refugee if they have a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of... political opinion." A former political prisoner's case often falls directly under this definition.

Resettlement: In cases where a former political prisoner cannot be integrated into the country where they first sought refuge, the UNHCR can work with other nations to resettle them, which is a key durable solution.

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD): These groups are crucial in the legal phase before and after release.

Legal Support: The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention can issue opinions that a person's imprisonment violates international law. This official UN finding can be a powerful tool for a former prisoner's legal defense or in their asylum claim, as it provides independent, expert evidence of persecution. While it doesn't grant protection, it can provide the legal basis for a country to do so.

Regional Human Rights Courts: For former political prisoners in member states, these courts can provide a formal legal remedy. The European and Inter-American human rights courts offer the most robust and binding legal remedies for individuals. The African Court is a powerful and growing mechanism for advocacy. Other regional bodies, like those in the Arab world and Southeast Asia, offer more limited legal remedies but are still important for advocacy, monitoring, and applying pressure on governments to respect the rights of their citizens, including political prisoners.

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Many NGOs are vital in the process, providing support that complements the work of the UN. International human rights organizations document cases of wrongful detention and abuse, creating essential evidence for asylum claims while using their global platforms to advocate for protection. Meanwhile, refugee and immigration-focused legal aid organizations offer specialized legal representation, helping former political prisoners navigate complex asylum procedures and represent them before national authorities.

Organizations Operating Internationally

World Liberty Congress - The WLC has key offices in both Madrid, Spain and Washington, DC, bringing together a network of leaders and activists from all over the world. They offer coaching sessions for family members of political prisoners and provide educational resources.

How to request help: Reach out through the WLC's contact us website page (<https://worldlibertycongress.org/contact/>)

Human Rights Foundation – A New York-based organization dedicated to protecting human rights activists around the world. Support includes a microgrant program providing financial support to activists who are working to challenge tyranny.

How to request help: Reach out through the HRF's contact us website page (<https://hrf.org/contact-us/>) or call the head office: +1 (212) 246-8486

Freedom House – Provides emergency assistance to human rights defenders and political prisoners worldwide. Support includes legal aid, trial monitoring, medical and living expenses, temporary relocation, and advocacy campaigns for release

How to request help: Reach out via Freedom House's Emergency Assistance Programs (contact through their website or partners) – they coordinate rapid support globally.

Front Line Defenders – An Ireland-based organization protecting human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk. Offers security/protection grants (up to €7,500) for physical and digital security improvements, legal fees for HRDs facing persecution, medical treatment for injuries, family assistance for imprisoned defenders, and emergency relocation as needed

How to request help: You can submit an application through Front Line Defenders' secure online form or use their 24/7 emergency hotline. In urgent cases, you can call +353-1-210-0489 for immediate assistance

Civil Rights Defenders – A Sweden-based NGO supporting HRDs globally. Operates an Emergency Fund that gives rapid assistance to those in acute danger – can cover legal aid, short-term safe relocation for defenders and families, physical/digital security measures, and security training.

How to request help: HRDs facing acute threats can apply for rapid support through CRD's Emergency Fund. Contact Civil Rights Defenders via info@crd.org or the Emergency Fund FAQ page for guidance. (CRD's head office: Tel +46 8 545 277 30)

People in Need – Centre for Human Rights and Democracy
 – A Czech organization working internationally. Provides direct assistance to civil activists, former political prisoners, and persecuted individuals in ~20 countries. Forms of support include monetary grants, legal support, psychosocial counseling, and emergency relocation to safer areas.

How to request help: Contact People in Need via their website or local offices. (They are a partner in the Lifeline consortium for at-risk CSOs, so they often coordinate requests from trusted local NGOs and networks.)

Freedom Now – A Washington, D.C.-based NGO providing pro bono legal representation and advocacy for prisoners of conscience worldwide. Its lawyers have helped free hundreds of individuals from arbitrary detention through international tribunals and high-profile campaigns. Freedom Now also advises on the rehabilitation of former prisoners and improving prison conditions.

How to request help: Prospective cases can be emailed to info@freedom-now.org. Freedom Now typically accepts referrals of individuals imprisoned for their human rights or pro-democracy activities and works with volunteer lawyers to mount legal petitions for their release.

ProtectDefenders.eu – The EU-led global consortium for HRD protection. It offers emergency grants up to €10,000 for at-risk activists and a Temporary Relocation Programme for those facing imminent threats. Eligible defenders can get help with short-term evacuation, safe shelter, and related expenses.

How to request help: Fill out the individual support form on ProtectDefenders' website or apply through one of its partners (e.g., Front Line Defenders' secure form. In emergencies, requests can be fast-tracked in any UN language.

Prisoners of Conscience (PoC) Fund – A UK-based charity specializing in financial assistance to individuals who suffered for defending human rights. Provides rapid relief grants to alleviate poverty or urgent needs, covers costs for

medical treatment, housing, food, and helps reunite families torn apart by imprisonment. Also offers bursaries for former prisoners to pursue education or re-qualify professionally.

How to request help: Individual applicants (or referral agencies) can apply through PoC's "Get Support" page. For guidance, contact the Grants Officer at grantsofficer@prisonersofconscience.org or call +44 (0)203 859 5244.

Redress – Redress works to assist torture survivors. They pursue legal justice for former prisoners (e.g., filing torture compensation claims, universal jurisdiction cases) and partner with local groups to ensure ex-detainees get psychosocial rehab.

How to request help: Contact Redress via their intake form or email info@redress.org. Provide a summary of the torture or ill-treatment suffered. Redress lawyers evaluate if they can take on the case or refer to other specialists (for instance, connecting a survivor with a rehabilitation center or a lawyer in their country).

Organizations Operating in Africa

African Defenders (Pan-African HRDs Network) – Umbrella network of five sub-regional defender coalitions across Africa. Runs the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative, a city-based temporary relocation program for threatened human rights defenders on the continent. Activists at serious risk can be hosted for a few months in a safe African city, receiving shelter and support to continue their work.

How to request help: Complete the Hub Cities application form and email it to hubcities@defenddefenders.org (the AfricanDefenders secretariat). The application (available in English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese) should document the applicant's HRD work and threats faced. Placement decisions are made case-by-case basis with confidentiality.

Defend Defenders – Regional network (East and Horn of Africa) based in Uganda, supporting defenders in East Africa. Offers 24/7

emergency assistance – this can include relocating an HRD to a safe house, financial and logistical support, and security advice when an activist is in imminent danger. Also provides capacity-building in digital security and advocacy for at-risk activists in the sub-region.

How to request help: East/Horn African HRDs in need can contact Defend Defenders' 24/7 hotline at +256-707-020-086. They can also reach Defend Defenders via email or Signal/WhatsApp (contact info on their website) to request urgent protection support.

Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders) – Coalition covering 10 countries in Southern Africa, coordinating holistic protection for activists. It manages an emergency fund (launched in 2019) that can provide temporary relocation, legal aid, medical, and psychosocial support for HRDs under attack. Also convenes regional workshops and gives out awards to recognize defenders.

How to request help: Human rights defenders in Southern Africa (Angola, Zimbabwe, Malawi, etc.) can email their protection request to protection@southernafricadefenders.africa. The Network will assess the risk and coordinate support (including relocating the defender or assisting family members as needed).

Dignity – Danish Institute Against Torture – Though based in Europe, Dignity works in several African countries to support torture survivors (many are former political prisoners). They partner with local rehabilitation centers to offer medical treatment, trauma counseling, and legal assistance for accountability.

How to request help: Individuals typically access Dignity's support through local partner clinics or NGOs. For example, a former prisoner can be referred to a Dignity-supported rehabilitation center in their country.

IRCT (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims) – A global network with a strong presence in Africa, uniting 160+ treatment centers for torture survivors. Former political prisoners who suffered torture can receive free medical care, psychological counseling, and social support at IRCT member centers.

How to request help: Find a local IRCT member clinic via the IRCT website and contact them directly. These centers (in countries like Kenya, DRC, South Africa, etc.) accept self-referrals or NGO referrals. IRCT's Secretariat can also guide victims to services (email: headquarters@irct.org).

Organizations Operating in Asia

FORUM-ASIA (Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development) – A regional network of 85+ NGOs across Asia. It operates a Protection Plan for Asian HRDs, offering emergency funds, temporary relocation support, trial observation, and other assistance when defenders are at risk. FORUM-ASIA provides grants for urgent security needs and can facilitate relocating activists within or outside their country for safety.

How to request help: Human rights defenders in Asia should contact FORUM-ASIA or one of its member organizations. Requests for protection or relocation can be sent to their Human Rights Defenders Programme (they list regional contact emails, e.g., una@forum-asia.org for UN Advocacy, etc.). FORUM-ASIA will assess the case and may deploy support or refer to partners.

South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) – Regional initiative spanning countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka. SAHR monitors the situation of political prisoners and advocates for their release and rehabilitation. It can facilitate legal aid and regional solidarity for defenders. (For instance, SAHR's members often help connect ex-detainees with lawyers and counselors.)

How to request help: You can either contact SAHR's country representatives or go through their website.

Safeguard Defenders – An NGO specializing in East Asia (notably China). Provides direct support to dissidents facing judicial persecution, including clandestine safehouses, exfiltration support, and guides for families of the disappeared. Publishes handbooks (e.g., for families of Chinese political detainees) and helps former prisoners resettle abroad when needed.

How to request help: Due to security, initial contact is encrypted. Safeguard Defenders can be reached via secure email or Signal (details on their website). Families of prisoners and threatened activists often approach them through trusted intermediaries or via their published emergency contact channels.

Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) – Based in Hong Kong, AHRC assists victims of human rights abuses across Asia. Through its Urgent Appeals program, it highlights cases of political imprisonment and sometimes provides financial relief or temporary shelter for activists in immediate danger.

How to request help: Submit an urgent appeal via AHRC’s online form or email. While AHRC’s main role is advocacy, in certain cases, they mobilize resources for the victim’s legal defense or basic needs. (For example, AHRC has a partner fund for emergency assistance in South Asia.)

Organizations Operating in the Middle East

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) – An independent NGO supporting human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighboring Middle East countries. GCHR provides protection and support, such as emergency advocacy, trial observation, and rapid response grants for defenders under threat. They issue urgent action appeals and will help coordinate safe relocation or legal aid when activists are in imminent danger.

How to request help: Contact GCHR through their website’s “Get Help” form. Individuals at risk are encouraged to reach out (securely) – GCHR has an online Emergency Application for HRDs. By clicking “Get Help Now”, one can submit details of the threat; GCHR’s protection staff will review the case confidentially and develop a support plan.

MENA Rights Group – A Geneva-based legal advocacy organization for the Middle East/North Africa. Provides pro

bono legal support for victims of arbitrary detention and torture, often by bringing cases before UN mechanisms.

How to request help: Families or representatives can contact MENA Rights Group via their secure online form. They will ask for details and documentation of the detention. Once they take a case, they liaise directly with UN special procedures.

EuroMed Rights (Euro-Mediterranean Network) – A regional network spanning Europe and MENA, it has a Working Group on Palestine, Egypt, etc., that supports political prisoners through advocacy and by linking local groups to emergency funds. For example, EuroMed Rights helps direct EU support to imprisoned activists' legal defense and medical needs.

How to request help: Local partner NGOs typically channel requests. (Individuals in MENA can contact a member organization or EuroMed Rights' offices in Tunis/Brussels.)

Organizations Operating in Europe

Country for Life - Country for Life (Країна для жыцця) supports political prisoners and their families in Belarus. They provide psychological help, support in legal matters, and support and advice for moving to Lithuania. Additionally, there is a Family Friend Program, where your family can be taken under partial financial guardianship.

How to request help: Belarusians can apply to specific programs on the homepage (<https://www.stranafund.org/>) and also by emailing: contact@stranafund.org and press@stranafund.org

United Assistance Center for Ukrainian Prisoners – A coalition (including Center for Civil Liberties, Euromaidan SOS) focusing on Ukrainians imprisoned for political reasons (in Russia or occupied territories). Provides legal aid (e.g., lawyers for show trials in Crimea), lobbies for prisoner exchanges, and after release, offers medical/psychological help and temporary housing for returnees.

How to request help: Families of Ukrainian political prisoners can reach out via the Center’s hotline or email (published on CCL’s website). The coalition will help navigate international mechanisms (such as the European Court of Human Rights) and ensure the released prisoner gets rehabilitation services.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – ICRC can assist former political prisoners (especially in war zones) with travel documents, transportation home, and medical checkups. They also administer a humanitarian assistance program for families of missing or detained persons.

How to request help: While individuals cannot “apply” to ICRC like an NGO, families should inform their local Red Cross if a relative is detained for political reasons.

Organizations Operating in Latin America

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights – Latin America – RFK Human Rights (USA) supports defenders in Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela through grants and emergency evacuations. Under its Souad Al-Shammary Fund, it has given rapid assistance to women HRDs in Latin America, including safe shelter and legal aid. RFK also partners with local orgs to provide stipends to former political prisoners as they rebuild their lives.

How to request help: RFK Human Rights accepts requests through its Emergency Funding Support page. They list various funds (including ProtectDefenders, Lifeline) in a roundup of resources for HRDs and journalists. A Latin American activist can email RFK with a brief on their situation to see if any of the funds can be accessed quickly.

Former Political Prisoners’ Networks and Solidarity Communities

Testimonies repeatedly highlight the importance of broader solidarity

networks. In Latin America, the term “Emotional Community” was proposed to designate solidarity groups that have emerged in situations of political oppression, where the bond that arises from sharing the pain of injustice weaves networks of resistance and political mobilization. The authors who proposed the term state that: “the victims summon solidarity and manage to unite, at least temporarily, a fragmented civil society in this act.”

State violence isn’t just about silencing individuals; intimidation aims to paralyze society by fragmenting and isolating it. Authoritarianism thrives on division, while acts of resistance rebuild the social fabric.

Experience with political imprisonment and family support has spawned an international network linking activists to aid persecuted families—a shining example of emotional communities. These organizations specialize on the topic of wrongful and arbitrary detentions, often with the support of families, communities, and specialists. These support groups are often helpful if you are looking for organizations that can relate to and have experience with the issue of political imprisonment.

Solidarity Communities and Networks

World Liberty Congress (WLC) – Political Prisoner Support Team (PPST)

Through a global network of activists, leaders, and advocates, World Liberty Congress empowers individuals fighting for democracy in autocratic regimes. The Political Prisoners Support Team (PPST) is a dedicated network within the World Liberty Congress that provides crucial support to the families and advocates for political prisoners.

Link: <https://worldlibertycongress.org/what-we-do/we-support/>

The McCain Institute – Human Rights & Freedom Program

The McCain Institute is a nonpartisan organization inspired by Senator John McCain and his family’s dedication to public service. They are part of Arizona State University and based in Washington,

D.C. Their programs defend democracy, advance human rights, and empower character-driven leaders. The Human Rights & Freedom Program protects and advances individual human rights and freedom around the world by working with American policymakers and other strategic partners to spur bold action to prevent violations from occurring and to hold perpetrators accountable.

Link: <https://www.mccainstitute.org/programs/human-rights-freedom/>

RIGHTS Coalition

The Human Rights Coalition is a group of incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, and their family members and supporters who fight for prisoners' rights and lives.

Link: <https://www.hrcoalition.org/about>

Bring Our Families Home

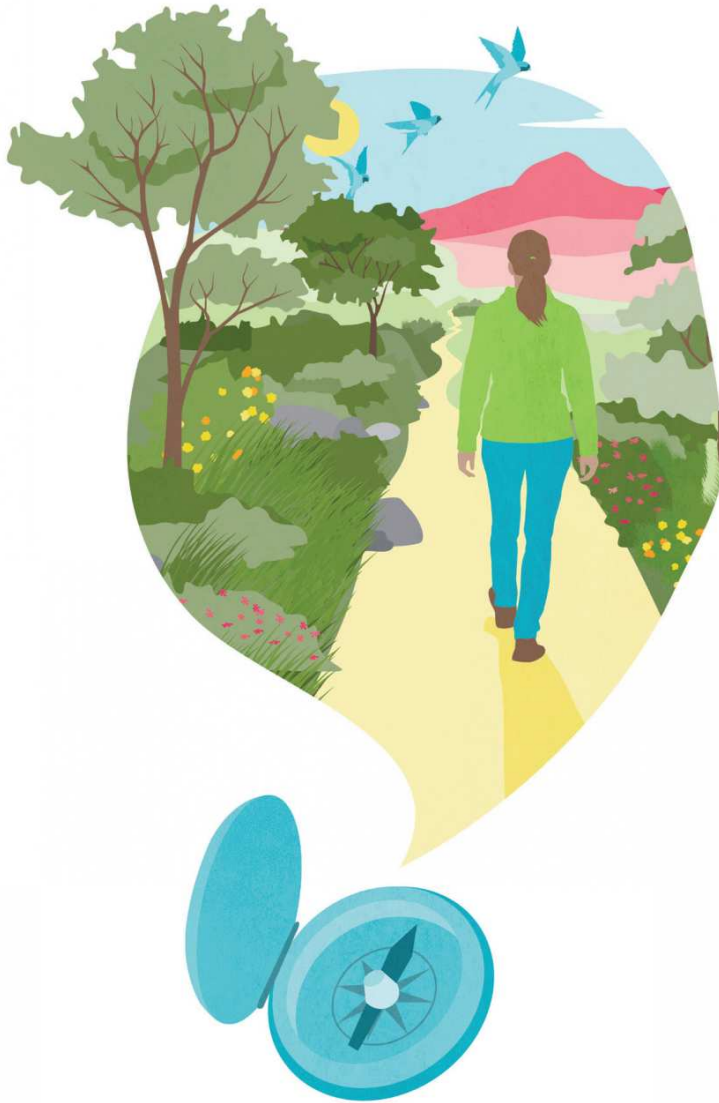
Bring Our Families Home (BOFH) is a campaign comprised entirely of the families of Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained overseas.

Link: <https://www.bringourfamilieshome.org/>

Hostage International

Hostage International provides specialist assistance for people affected by kidnappings and arbitrary detention worldwide. Their comprehensive approach helps individuals, families and organizations navigate these challenging situations. They are not involved in resolution but fill a much-needed gap in helping people understand how these incidents are resolved. They help to make sense of any difficulties along the way and offer on-going support after release.

Link: <https://www.hostageinternational.org>



Chapter 14

PATHWAY TO SUSTAINED RESILIENCE

The end of one chapter—and the beginning of another

Release from political imprisonment is not an epilogue; it is the first page of a new stage—at home or in exile—filled with work that asks for patience, courage, and above all, resilience. Crossing the gate does not erase nights of fear, humiliation, or separation; it invites a different kind of strength. Naming this truth is not surrender. It is the first step in turning pain into purpose.

Research shows trauma imprints itself on bodies and families—Rachel Yehuda documents biological scars passed down through generations. She found that the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors were left with biological imprints—changes in DNA methylation linked to the body’s primary stress hormone. Trauma can be passed on just as resilience can be transmitted too. When survivors rebuild bonds and share their truth within a caring community, they pass on competence, courage, and hope. As Viktor Frankl wrote, “Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose

one’s attitude.” That daily choice transforms suffering into meaning.

Many carry survivor’s guilt—“Why did I leave when others stayed?”—and face smear campaigns that recast defenders of dignity as common criminals. These attacks aim to isolate you and rewrite your story. Your sacrifice was noble, not folly. Counter guilt with truth and compassion; counter smears with calm documentation and the strategies in this manual. Your dignity isn’t defined by an algorithm.

Our first manual affirmed it, and this one does too: families are liberators. They carried the search for justice during imprisonment; now they carry the work of reintegration. Their love protects sleep, structures routines, and reopens the world—often before institutions do. To every spouse, parent, sibling, and friend who stood in line with water, who learned new laws, who answered the phone at impossible hours: your love is liberating. It restores trust to children who have known too much uncertainty. It also travels outward: one proven way to heal is to help others—mentoring a newly released person, sharing a checklist with another family, or joining a community of support. Service does not erase wounds, but it gives them meaning.

Whether you rebuild under surveillance at home or navigate new systems abroad, you’re not returning to what was but finding what comes next. Both paths demand vigilance and honor. Each small victory—an hour’s sleep, a filed document, a reassuring smile—lights the way forward. Children learn resilience by watching how we live with our wounds. When they see us seek help, apologize, rest, and persevere, they learn that pain isn’t the final word. Resilience, as Boris Cyrulnik reminds us, isn’t forgetting—it’s integrating what happened into a life that grows.

Our shared commitment

Authoritarianism is advancing in many places; it will recede only if free people stand together. The World Liberty Congress renews its pledge:

- To stand with those still imprisoned and their families;
- To accompany those released as they heal, rebuild, and—if they choose—return to public life;
- To strengthen practical protections against transnational repression, including its financial and reputational forms;

- And to amplify children’s needs, ensuring their safety, schooling, and emotional care remain central in every plan.

We extend heartfelt gratitude to the survivors and families who shared their testimonies for this manual, and to the organizations—local and international—whose experience and courage made these pages possible. Your voices shape what the world learns and does. To those who today emerge from darkness and breathe the air of freedom once more: never forget that you do not walk alone. We are together in reclaiming our lives. Every wound we carry is also a seed of hope for others, and every step you take forward will be accompanied by our hands, our eyes, and our hearts.

We commit to hold you up when weariness weighs heavy, to celebrate every victory—no matter how small—and to remind you that your dignity is unbreakable. As a team, as a community, as activists, we will stand with you and your families, steadfast and present, until the day when no one must suffer imprisonment for thinking, loving, or dreaming of a free world.

Let us celebrate freedom together!

This publication concludes with gratitude to all those who contributed to its creation and to the families and former political prisoners whose testimonies inspired its pages.

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After Liberation: Handbook for the Reintegration of Political Prisoners offers guidance for a journey that is often invisible—the return to life after surviving arbitrary detention for political reasons. It is a path marked by loss, adaptation, and deep transformation, especially in contexts where justice and truth remain absent.

This handbook offers practical tools and reflections on emotional recovery, digital and legal safety, economic reintegration, and rebuilding relationships. Each section was created with input from former political prisoners, their families, psychologists, legal experts, and human rights defenders.

The aim of this manual is not only to accompany those who have been released, but also to accompany and honor the families who carried the struggle alongside them. Reintegration is not the end of the struggle—it is a continuation, a personal and collective journey to restore dignity, freedom, and purpose. This manual stands as a companion for that road, affirming that moving forward with courage is, in itself, a powerful act of resistance.

