

Psychological First Aid

Sharing your “calm”

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What is Psychological First Aid (PFA):

Psychological first aid (PFA) is a humane, supportive response to a fellow human being who is suffering and who may need support (Sphere 2011, IASC (2007)). You can provide PFA when you first have contact with very distressed people. It is not something only mental health professionals can do and involves the following aspects:

- providing practical care and support, which is not intrusive
- assessing needs and concerns
- helping people to address basic needs (for example, food and water, clothing, and housing information)
- listening to people, but not pressuring them to talk
- comforting people and helping them to feel calm-(sharing your calm with them)
- helping people connect to information, services, and social supports
- protecting people from further harm.

What PFA is not:

- It is not something that only professionals can do
- It is not professional counseling.
- It is not “psychological debriefing” in that PFA does not necessarily involve a detailed discussion of the event that caused the distress
- It is not asking someone to analyze what happened to them or to put time and events in order
- Although PFA involves being available to listen to people’s stories, it is not about pressuring people to tell you their feelings and reactions to an event.

PFA is extremely helpful to people's long-term recovery.

These include:

- feeling safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful
- having access to social, physical and emotional support
- and feeling able to help themselves, as individuals and communities.

Not Everyone needs PFA

Not everyone who experiences a crisis event will need or want PFA. **Do not force help on people who do not want it** but make yourself available to those who may want support.

When to know your limits

There may be situations when someone needs much more advanced support than PFA alone. In order to avoid harm, know your limits and get help from others, such as medical personnel and mental health professionals, local authorities, or community and religious leaders.

How do I know if someone needs more immediate advanced support?

The following people need more immediate advanced support. People in these situations need medical or other help as a priority to save life.

- people with serious, life-threatening injuries who need emergency medical care
- people who are so upset that they cannot care for themselves or their children
- people who are dissociating or depersonalizing (have amnesia or are unable to speak or move on their own, and seeing things that aren't real)
- people who may hurt themselves
- people who may hurt others

People may react in various ways to a crisis. Some examples of distress responses to crisis are listed below:

The following are expected responses to a crisis:

- physical symptoms (for example, shaking, headaches, feeling very tired, loss of appetite, aches and pains)
- crying, sadness, depressed mood, grief
- anxiety, fear
- being “on guard” or “jumpy”
- worry that something really bad is going to happen
- insomnia, nightmares
- irritability, anger
- guilt, shame (for example, for having survived, or for not helping or saving others)
- Not wanting to talk or withdrawing

The following responses are of concern and if the person is staying in these states after being in safety for some time, more advanced care is advised:

- confused, emotionally numb, or feeling unreal or in a daze
- appearing withdrawn or very still (not moving)
- not responding to others, not speaking at all
- disorientation (for example, not knowing their own name, where they are from, or what happened)
- not being able to care for themselves or their children (for example, not eating or drinking, not able to make simple decisions)

Some people may only be mildly distressed or not distressed at all. It is important to remember that there is no right way for a victim to respond in a crisis

- It is important to remember that a person fleeing danger may have used up all their fight/flight responses in their journey to safety. You may find that they sleep a lot or conversely, are still hyper-alert.

Principles of Psychological First Aid

There are five key principles of PFA:

- promoting a sense of safety
- promoting a sense of calm
- promoting a sense of self and community efficacy
- fostering connectedness
- instilling hope

When providing PFA, it's important to keep each of these principles in mind. **It is important to also remember that your actions and attitudes can convey these things above and beyond what words can convey so do not let the frustration of not speaking the same language stifle you.**

Conveying a sense of safety

You can convey safety by:

- protecting people from situations that may cause them further distress, such as seeing terrible things on the news or in person, receiving bad news in an insensitive or uncontrolled way
- providing a barrier when contact by the media is unwanted
- In some settings, promoting safety will involve helping people put in place their own strategies as they go forward

Promoting a sense of calm

It cannot be overemphasized how important our own behaviors and attitudes can influence the responses of people in crisis. It is vitally important to monitor our own attitudes and behaviors when supporting people in crisis. We can convey a sense of calm through our own calm behaviors and help the person in crisis self-regulate their fear responses. **We can “lend them our calm”**

You can promote a sense of calm by:

- Using calm, slow, friendly voices
- Avoiding use of frantic verbiage and rushed behaviors if not in active crisis situations where physical safety is at risk. **Frantic behavior on your part is interpreted as danger to them**
- Delivering instructions in short sentences and allowing time for processing. When a person is in crisis, they cannot process long sets of instructions.
- Providing order and quiet spaces for highly distressed people
- Be aware that loud, sudden noises and exposure to media reports of the ongoing crisis can be very disturbing to them

Promoting sense of self and community efficacy

This is about helping people to have a sense of control over positive outcomes by encouraging people to see a link between the actions they take, either as an individual or as a community, and positive outcomes.

You can convey this by:

- Asking them what they need and not making assumptions
- Reminding them that they and their families bring with them many existing strengths and that they are best equipped to determine the next course for their situation.
- Helping them remember and incorporate their own abilities
- Helping them to determine and access what resources they may be missing so that they can take positive actions to support their own recovery.
- Providing them with resources and allowing them to make an informed decision for themselves

Promoting connectedness

Connectedness is critical to recovery from trauma. Your support and care of individuals experiencing crisis and trauma is a vital support to further recovery. **Your very presence promotes connectedness.**

You can promote connectedness by:

- Helping people to solve practical problems through information sharing and helping with daily tasks to gain emotional understanding and acceptance of what has happened.
- Ensuring families are kept together, helping people contact loved ones, or linking them with relevant services.

Instilling hope

Most of us are unprepared for a very traumatic event and it can lead to people no longer seeing the world as a safe or predictable place as they did before the trauma. This can lead to a sense of hopelessness, and people can even give up trying.

You can help instill hope by:

- helping individuals to understand that their reactions are common, and conveying an expectation that people can recover from trauma
- supporting people to take one step at a time and to notice small gains so that they can begin to look forward.
- Avoiding making false promises or sending refugees to resources that might not be available
- Your very presence provides hope

References:

World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation and World Vision International (2011). Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers. WHO: Geneva

Phoenix Australia Disaster Mental Health Hub (2021) *Understand more about the principles that underpin the use of Psychological First Aid – Transcript*, accessed 11 March 2022

<https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/disaster-hub/resources/understand-more-about-the-principles-that-underpin-the-use-of-psychological-first-aid-transcript/>