

Psychological First Aid

Section 1:
Introduction to Psychological First
Aid (PFA)

Section 2:
The 7 Components of PFA

Section 3:
Taking Care of Yourself



Section 1: Introduction to Psychological First Aid

This guidance is written to support those helping others in distress during and after the COVID 19 Pandemic.

After reading this, you should :

- Understand what Psychological First Aid (PFA) is and is not
- Understand the ways that Pandemic like COVID 19 can affect us
- Understand the 7 key components of effective PFA
- Feel able to deliver PFA support to others
- Adapt PFA to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups of people
- Identify ways to take care of yourself while providing PFA

What is Psychological First Aid?

- A humane, supportive and flexible response to a fellow human being who is suffering during or after crises or emergencies, like the current COVID 19 pandemic.
- It assumes most people will respond to events with great resilience.
- It is for use during and following situations of extreme stress.
- It involves:
 - Providing practical care and support where necessary
 - Helping people address basic needs and concerns
 - Helping people connect to information, services and social supports
 - Comforting people and helping them to feel calm
 - Reducing distress and fostering adaptive coping.
 - Protecting people from further harm.

What Psychological First Aid is NOT

- It is not something that everybody affected by COVID 19 will need.
- It is not counselling.
- It is not “psychological debriefing” in that it does not involve a detailed discussion of the events that are causing the distress.
- It is not asking a person to analyse their situation.
- It is not about pressurising a person to talk about their feelings.
- It is not something that only professionals can do.

Psychological First Aid – Why?

Psychological First Aid involves offering humane, supportive and practical help.

Evidence (according to various studies and the consensus of many crisis helpers) tells us that people are more likely to be able to psychologically cope with and recover from ongoing situations like Covid 19 if they:

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

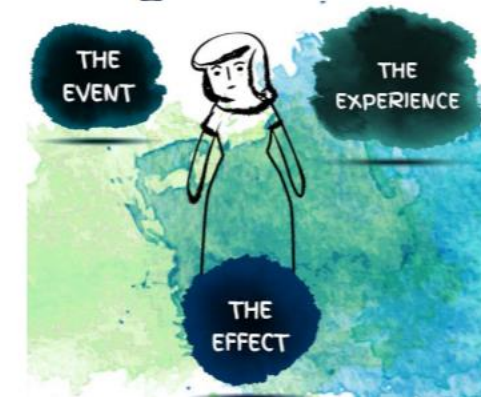
How do emergency events such as pandemics affect people?

Different kinds of crises affect people in different ways, and there's a wide range of responses that people can have.

Most often we respond with resilience, and in ways that are designed to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

How we respond depends on a number of factors, including:

- How much support we have at the time
- Our previous experience of distressing events
- Our perceived capacity to cope with the situation
- The nature and severity of the situation itself



Some normal responses to pandemic situations

- There are a broad range of ways in which people react during a pandemic.
- Distress may be common, but in most cases will not be associated with lasting difficulties.
- Strong emotions can be seen as adaptive and normal ways of responding to the characteristics of the pandemic environment:

| Features of Pandemic Environment | Normal Emotional responses |
|---|----------------------------|
| Uncertainty of the situation and about the future, Ongoing frequent and significant changes to our lives, Perceived threat | Distress – Anxiety |
| Loss – of previous lifestyle, of relationships and contacts, of employment, sometimes of loved ones | Sadness |
| Sense of unfairness Uncertainty of the situation, Ongoing changes to our lives , Perceived threat | Distress – Anger |
| Loss of sense of control over own world and life | Zoning out, shutting down |

Section 2: The Seven Components of Psychological First Aid



Before you start:

Before offering PFA , it is important that you have accurate information & keep yourself updated - learn about:

- The current details and facts about the pandemic
- The relevant current local and national advice, guidance and instructions.
- What services are available for what kinds of support – medical treatment, transport, medical, financial, childcare, how and when they should be accessed
- The range of reliable and accurate resources for support and sources of information that are available, particularly online
- Know when, how, why and where to access additional wellbeing supports for those who need it
- Who else is helping – what are the local community and online supports?
- Are there any immediate or ongoing dangers or security concerns?





Key Component 1: Care for Immediate Needs for Safety

Although some immediate needs are obvious, always ask.

- First identify if there are any immediate needs, like for medical treatment, medication, food, communication or accommodation.
 - Clear advice should be provided on what to do if someone is physically unwell (either with a diagnosis or symptoms of Covid19)
 - The practical and physical needs of health responders should be addressed e.g. in terms of personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Clarify each need by talking it through, considering what assistance might help.
- Develop an action plan together based on what resources are available, collaborating with people to enable them to make their own decisions
- Finally, support people to put this plan in to action, where possible supporting them to experience success



Key Component 2: Protect from Further Threat & Distress

- Ensure immediate physical safety, including medical care, supervision of children and those unable to take care of themselves.
 - Provide clear advice for family and carers of people who are physically unwell with Covid19- type symptom.
 - This may be obvious (like the need to take precautions against infection, or whether / how to seek medical attention)
 - It may be less obvious (like the risks of social isolation for those in domestically abusive relationships)
- Provide accurate situation information
 - Be accurate and honest in the information you provide
 - Avoid speculation, if you do not know the answer to a question, say so
- Attend to physical comfort
 - make sure people have access to a safe and comfortable environment .
- Recognise the needs of vulnerable groups, such as
 - children and the elderly
 - Those with pre-existing mental health conditions,
 - People with limited resources for example who are homeless or seeking asylum
 - People who may be cognitively impaired, through intellectual disability, dementia, or
 - Those with physical impairments such as hearing or sight loss or mobility problems
- Protect people from additional trauma and reminders
 - Encourage people to only access reputable sources of information, and to
 - Advise against excessive exposure to information, limit their checking of these to once or twice per day



Key Component 3: Comfort and Consolation for people in distress

Providing emotional comfort to people. The main elements are:

- Be respectful
 - Introduce yourself, giving your name, organisation, and role.
 - Ask people's permission to speak to them; ask for their names.
 - Address adults using their last name, unless given permission otherwise.
- Listen in order to help people feel calm
 - Speak calmly and with compassion.
 - Allow plenty time, try not to look around or seem distracted.
 - Do not pressure them to talk
 - Listen if they want to talk
 - If they are very distressed, help them to feel calm, and try to ensure they are not alone
- Offer support to people who are distressed or grieving
 - Provide a safe environment for people to deal with their grief.
 - Listen carefully, with empathy.
 - Let people tell you what they need.
 - Stay calm and take time with people.
 - If they need it, help them to plan how they will arrange a funeral



THINGS TO SAY AND DO ✓

- » Try to find a quiet place to talk, and minimize outside distractions.
- » Respect privacy and keep the person's story confidential, if this is appropriate.
- » Stay near the person but keep an appropriate distance depending on their age, gender and culture.
- » Let them know you are listening; for example, nod your head or say "hmmmm..."
- » Be patient and calm.
- » Provide factual information, **if** you have it. Be honest about what you know and don't know. "I don't know, but I will try to find out about that for you."
- » Give information in a way the person can understand – keep it simple.
- » Acknowledge how they are feeling and any losses or important events they tell you about, such as loss of their home or death of a loved one. "I'm so sorry. I can imagine this is very sad for you."
- » Acknowledge the person's strengths and how they have helped themselves.
- » Allow for silence.

THINGS NOT TO SAY AND DO ✗

- » Don't pressure someone to tell their story.
- » Don't interrupt or rush someone's story (for example, don't look at your watch or speak too rapidly).
- » Don't touch the person if you're not sure it is appropriate to do so.
- » Don't judge what they have or haven't done, or how they are feeling. Don't say: "You shouldn't feel that way," or "You should feel lucky you survived."
- » Don't make up things you don't know.
- » Don't use terms that are too technical.
- » Don't tell them someone else's story.
- » Don't talk about your own troubles.
- » Don't give false promises or false reassurances.
- » Don't think and act as if you must solve all the person's problems for them.
- » Don't take away the person's strength and sense of being able to care for themselves.
- » Don't talk about people in negative terms (for example, don't call them "crazy" or "mad").



From WHO (2011) Psychological First Aid: A guide for field workers.

Accessed:

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44615/9789241548205_eng.pdf;jsessionid=E437A8B252C3B3FA9945A4CB819C73B8?sequence=1



Key Component 4: Provide Information and Support for Practical Tasks

This may involve supporting people with their medical needs, financial needs, childcare, or with funeral arrangements.

Make sure people are informed where and how to access services, especially vulnerable people

- Say only what you know – do not make up information
- Keep messages simple and accurate, repeat often
- Explain the source and reliability of information you give

Support people's resilience and sense of control when possible, to generate their own solutions:

- Clarify options and describe what may happen.
- Ask which option they think is best for them.
- Help make an appointment if necessary



Consider a broad range of services

People may need assistance with access to:

- Medical treatment
- Food
- Health
- Housing
- Finance
- Social services
- Childcare
- Faith-based services
- Funeral planning
- Support groups

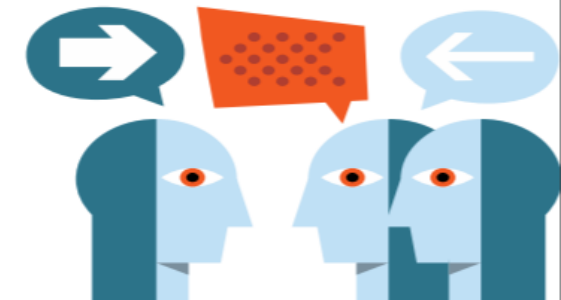




Key Component 5: Provide Information on Coping

Providing people with information and strategies that will reduce their distress and promote coping.

- Ongoing emergency situations can be disorientating, confusing and overwhelming.
- They can compromise a person's ability to cope with problems.
- Helping to promote effective coping is an important step in helping people adjust to what has happened and plan for the future.
- You can help people:
 - Access information online about normal reactions to extreme stress, positive coping & self care
 - Think about different coping options.
 - Identify successful coping mechanisms they've used in the past
 - Creatively adapt their normal coping strategies to social isolation conditions.
 - Understand possible negative consequences of some coping strategies.
 - Make conscious choices about how they cope.
 - Increase their sense of control



Ways of coping: Some examples

Helpful



- Use coping mechanisms that have worked well in the past.
- Think creatively about how you can adapt them to conditions of social isolation / distancing
- Talk to friends and family for support by phone or online.
- Make a plan for coping with social isolation that will help you feel useful – jobs to be completed, skills to develop
- Get enough rest, nutrition and exercise.
- Set and maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Relax: schedule time to do what normally helps you to relax
- Take part in an online support or community group.
- Use humour.
- Focus on something practical that will help right now.
- Understand and tolerate the different ways people cope with stress – they may be more short tempered or distractible
- Pay special attention to reactions & behaviours of children.
- Help young people understand why adults may be behaving differently

Unhelpful



These behaviours can be seen as understandable responses to traumatic or overwhelming events, but they may lead to other problems.

- Spending large amounts of time watching news broadcasts about the pandemic
- Loss of structure to the day
- Alcohol and substance misuse.
- Withdrawing from friends and family.
- Over-eating or under-eating.
- Blaming self or others.
- Doing risky things.
- Getting violently angry

Key Component 6: Connect with Social Support

- People recover more quickly when they are connected to family and friends. It supports:
 - A sense of self-worth, well-being, confidence and hope.
 - The sharing of experiences and concerns.
 - Making sense of what has happened.
 - A degree of normality.
 - Participation in problem-solving and supporting of others.
 - The sharing of information.
- It is especially important in the context of social distancing to support people to connect with their natural support networks, including their loved ones, friends and communities.
 - Encourage creative ways to maintain meaningful social contact despite isolation measures
 - People may need help or encouragement to connect through internet by phone or by other means.
 - Make sure people know how to access means of communication adapted to their needs, especially vulnerable people
 - Support access to community and religious support
 - Be aware of and able to link people with local and national online resources and supports
- Community online resources can also be important.



Key Component 7: Educate and Normalise Responses

People can experience a wide range of reactions and responses during and after an emergency situation. We can sometimes interpret these responses as meaning there is something wrong with us. In fact they are most often often perfectly normal and common human reactions to abnormal events .

It is important to understand the most common responses and reactions to emergencies so that you can help people understand and normalise their reactions. Key messages:

- It's normal for people to have strong emotions in an emergency situation
- Psychological reactions to an emergency can be best understood as the reactions of normal human beings to sudden, unexpected and unpredictable threats.
- Intense emotions will come and go.
- People will have a range of reactions, and need to know that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to think, feel and respond. These can include:

| Features of Pandemic Environment | Normal emotional responses | Normal cognitive responses |
|---|--|--------------------------------|
| Uncertainty of the situation and about the future, Ongoing frequent and significant changes to our lives, Perceived threat | Distress – Anxiety Euphoria | Distraction, Loss of focus |
| Sense of unfairness Uncertainty of the situation, Ongoing changes to our lives , Perceived threat | Distress – Anger Dark Humour | Irritability |
| Loss – of previous lifestyle, of relationships and contacts, of employment, sometimes of loved ones | Sadness Guilt Grief Shame | Feeling slow Confusion |
| Loss of sense of control over own world and life | Zoning out, shutting down, shock, numbing, Physical reactions like pain Quest for meaning | Shut down Lack of responses |

Consider the needs of people who may need additional or adapted information or support:

- Children and adolescents, especially if caregivers are unwell
- People who:
 - Are neuro-diverse - for example with Autistic Spectrum Disorders or ADHD
 - Have cognitive impairment or dementia
 - Have hearing / visual loss or impairment
 - Have chronic illnesses
 - Have pre-existing mental health conditions
 - Have an intellectual disability
- People with limited access to supports and resources/ affected by:
 - Homelessness
 - Domestic abuse
 - Asylum seeking
 - Substance Misuse
 - English not a first language

Section 3: Taking Care of Yourself



- Providing public and/or patient care in a pandemic situation is stressful and may involve long hours, emotional involvement with distressed people and exposure to death and injury.
- When providing Psychological First Aid (PFA) you might feel:
 - Stressed, upset, tired, overwhelmed, inadequate and frustrated
- Thinking about how to take care of yourself is important not only for your own wellbeing, but so that you can be more effective in providing PFA.

The A B Cs of Self Care:



Awareness



Balance



Connection

A: **Awareness** and normalisation of your own responses to stress

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Be aware of your own personal signs of stress. Be compassionate to yourself – remind yourself that:

- These are normal reactions to an extraordinary situation
- Your reaction is **not** an indication that you are not capable, but that you need to pay attention to taking care of yourself
- You can acknowledge and seek to tackle risks and sources of stress where possible, in collaboration with colleagues



B: Balance between your life and the demands of your work

Although the demands may be extreme, do not have extreme expectations of yourself:

- A balance of roles at work, rotating between more and less stressful roles
- Know your limits, and maintain yourself within them – saying no or delegating when you can
- Take regular breaks when you can, even for short periods.
- Try to keep reasonable working hours and manage the size of your workload.
- Planning time away from work for relaxation and recreation, to balance work stress.
- Practise stress management.
- Minimise your intake of alcohol, caffeine or nicotine and avoid non-prescription drugs.
- Eat healthily and stay hydrated.



C: Connection with your people and social supports, and to your own values

- Access supervision and peer consultation routinely
- Try to pair up with a colleague especially if you are new to this work.
- Seek out telephone or online contact with friends, loved ones or other people you trust for support.
- Attend to your connections with loved ones when you are at home – and pay attention to numbing or shutting off mentally.
- Take time to connect to your values, and why the work you are doing is important and meaningful to you



Responding to psychological risks if you are working directly or indirectly with those affected by COVID 19

This work involves includes risk of exposure to infection, but the demands of the situation also include risks to your physical, mental and social wellbeing.

Just as physical protection from infection is critical to your ability to stay safe and continue to do your job -

Psychological protection from the impact of chronic stress associated with working in a pandemic environment is also important in supporting you to do your job safely and well.

All of us will have individual vulnerabilities and strengths in the face of physical and psychological stress.

The good news is that most of us will be relatively resilient in the face of theses risks, if we take the right steps to protect our resilience:

1. Be aware of your own personal signs that your risk from chronic stress is increasing:
 - Think about what your own personal signs of increasing stress are.
 - The next slide can help you to create your own personal traffic light system that warns you when you are at risk. What are your amber warning signs of stress?
2. Identify and use your own tried and tested strategies for managing stress think of these as your Psychological Protection. There are some example on the next-but-one slide. What are yours?
3. If you think it would be useful in these new and more extreme circumstances, you might want to learn and use some new protective coping strategies, like mindfulness, grounding, or relaxation. There are many helpful apps and websites that can help you do this.

| Type of wellbeing | Physical wellbeing | Psychological Wellbeing | Social Wellbeing |
|---|--|--|--|
| At risk warning: | Examples: | Examples: | Examples: |
| Green - none | Physically fit and strong, Exercising as normal Sleeping well, rested Eating and drinking as normal | Enjoying leisure activities Feeling mentally well, focussed Being interested and curious about the world | Feeling connected to colleagues, regular opportunity for check ins Regular meaningful restorative contact with loved ones |
| Amber- possible risk – time to do something | More tired/ weak than normal Reducing activities that bring sense of enjoyment / meaning Infrequent or unhealthy eating and drinking | Feeling angry or anxious, low or sad at work much of the time Difficult to focus: At the edge of your personal “stretch” zone Can’t stop thinking about difficult events from the work shift | Limited sense of connection with work colleagues / team Reduced social contact Withdrawing mentally from loved ones |
| Red – stop, take action | Disrupted / no sleep Exhausted or lethargic Drinking alcohol / abusing substances to cope No physical or leisure activity | Feeling unable to cope or afraid nearly all the time Becoming angry at work and at home Totally absorbed in thoughts about difficult or terrifying work events | Isolated from or avoiding connections with colleagues Cut off from family and friends Avoiding and/or dreading any social activity, social isolation |

| Type of Risk | Physical Demands | Psychological stress | Isolation/loss of connection |
|--------------------|--|--|--|
| Type of Protection | Behaviours | Thoughts | Social connections |
| During work | <p>Permission form self and others to take breaks in a safe environment</p> <p>Eat and drink well</p> <p>Pace yourself</p> | <p>Focus attention on what you can control Notice and limit rumination</p> <p>Understand normal responses to stress Notice your own stress response, acknowledge it is OK & normal to feel stress</p> <p>Take mental “breathing space” breaks when physical ones may be impossible</p> | <p>Opportunities for regular check in with colleagues</p> <p>Work with a buddy where possible</p> <p>Maintain connection with outside supports in breaks</p> |
| Leaving work | <p>Do a physical 'check in' - “Am I ok?”</p> <p>What steps do I need to take to be OK?</p> <p>Who can I speak to / what do I need ?</p> | <p>Take a moment to say to yourself “<i>Today's shift is over. I have done what I can.</i>”</p> <p>Reflect on your day and acknowledge your feelings. What went well?</p> <p>Intentionally switch your attention to home, restore, recharge, replenish & rest</p> | <p>Connect and share with colleagues.</p> <p>Check on your colleagues before you leave. Are they ok?</p> |
| At home | <p>Balance – try to plan activities that you know help you relax and that provide light to the shade of the day's work.</p> <p>Prioritise rest, exercise & eating.</p> <p>Plan a wind-down routine to sleep</p> | <p>Awareness – notice the days impact on your Body, Emotions, Relationships and Activity</p> <p>Plan a wind down routine to mentally and physically disconnect from work</p> <p>Take time to consciously switch off mentally from work</p> | <p>Connection – create and sustain mental and physical connections to people and activities that are important.</p> <p>Connect also to your values – why is this work important you and your community?</p> |

For Managers of Healthcare staff:

Keep all staff protected from psychological as well as physical risks. Psychological protection from chronic stress and poor mental health can be as important as physical protection from infection in supporting staff capacity to fulfil their roles safely.

- Ensure good quality communication and accurate information updates are provided to all staff.
- Be clear that stress and the feelings associated with it are quite normal reactions in the current situation, and that managing your mental health and psychosocial wellbeing during this time is as important as managing your physical health.
- Rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions.
- Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues. The buddy system helps to provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety procedures.
- Initiate, encourage and monitor work breaks.
- Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member impacted by a stressful event.
- Ensure you build in time for colleagues to provide social support to each other.
- Facilitate access to, and ensure staff are aware of where they can access mental health and psychosocial support services.
- It is important that the above provisions and strategies are in place for both workers and managers, and that managers can be a role-model of self-care strategies to mitigate stress.

Key PFA messages:

1. To look after others effectively – you first have to look after yourself. Apply these PFA principles to yourself.
2. Distress and strong emotions are normal human responses to a pandemic situation
3. Responding a person in distress, first make sure that any immediate and ongoing needs or risks are clarified and attended to.
4. Although you may not be able to help someone to solve all the things they are currently facing, by listening more than talking, by offering comfort and consolation, you can help them to become and stay calm, which will support them to use their normal coping mechanisms.
5. It is critical that you are aware of the facts and resources available, so that you can offer clear and accurate information and support for practical tasks, and connect people to the services and resources that they need.
6. All the evidence suggests that people who are connected to their family , friends and community are likely to cope better and to recover – think creatively with a person about how they might overcome the barriers of social isolation to make sure they are connected to those that matter to them

Congratulations - You've reached the end of this unit.

If you can, now take a moment to:

- Reflect on how you will use the seven key components of Psychological First Aid in your work
- Create a traffic light warning system and a psychological protection plan for your own self care.



Reference:

- NHS SCOTLAND EDUCATION with Thanks