

# PFA

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID



**STRONGER  
TOGETHER**

**A GUIDE TO HELP YOU & YOUR COMMUNITY**

**PAHO**



Pan American  
Health  
Organization



World Health  
Organization  
Member of the Americas





The Pan American Health Organization and the Caribbean Development Bank developed this booklet as a tool to help you take care of yourself and your community during crisis situations. This is achieved through psychological first aid, also known as PFA, a humane, supportive and practical response to a fellow human being who is suffering and may need support.

In this booklet, our “PFA helper” will guide you through the three basic principles of PFA: look, listen and link. This will help you to approach affected people, listen and understand their needs, and link them with practical support and information. It will also bring to your attention the needs of specific groups, including men, women, children and adolescents, and people with disabilities, among others.

Enjoy the booklet, read it again from time to time, share it with friends, family and members of your community, and spread the message:

“Stronger Together”.

# A DISASTER



\* PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

**PFA\***  
HUMAN  
SUPPORTIVE  
RESPONSE

NOT ONLY  
PROS CAN  
DO IT

YOU CAN ALSO SUPPORT  
YOUR COMMUNITY  
EVERYONE HAS  
**STRENGTHS  
& ABILITIES**  
TO HELP OTHERS COPE  
WITH THEIR LIFE CHALLENGES

BUT FIRST  
YOU NEED TO  
**FEEL OK**

People who  
are suffering  
may need  
support.

PEOPLE  
MAY HAVE DIFFERENT  
DISTRESS REACTIONS



DO NOT  
FORCE  
HELP



MAKE  
YOURSELF  
EASILY  
AVAILABLE



CAN BE  
VERY HELPFUL



LONG TERM  
RECOVERY



This guide will help you to know the most supportive things to say and do for distressed people.



LOOK

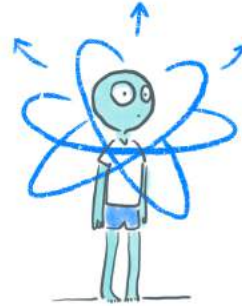
LOOK

# YOUR SAFETY FIRST!



Crisis situations change rapidly :

- Weather conditions
- Flooding
- Building that may collapse...



Take time to “look” around you before offering help.



be calm



be safe



think before you act

# OBVIOUS URGENT BASIC NEEDS



## LIFE THREATENING CONDITIONS?



Need rescuing, such as people trapped or in immediate danger?

Critically injured and in need of emergency, medical help?



IF YOU CANNOT ACT, LOOK FOR HELP OR TRAINED PEOPLE

## BASIC NEEDS?

Need shelter, food?



Protection from the weather, torn clothing?



People may react in various ways to a crisis **immediatly**, and **in the following days**.



**LOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE LIKELY TO NEED SPECIAL ATTENTION**

Severely distressed people should not be left alone!

Try to keep them safe until the reaction passes or until you can find help.

## SERIOUS DISTRESS REACTIONS

- children & adolescents
- people with health conditions or physical and mental disabilities

## DISORIENTATION

Not knowing their own name, what happened...

Anger, anxiety & fear

### IRRITABILITY



### ON GUARD JUMPY



## CONFUSED

Emotionnaly numb or feeling unreal

### PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Shaking, headaches, feeling very tired, loss of appetite...

### NOT RESPONDING NOT SPEAKING AT ALL

### GUILT, SHAME FOR HAVING SURVIVED OR FOR NOT SAVING OTHERS

### CRYING, SADNESS, DEPRESSED MOOD, GRIEF



### INSOMNIA, NIGHTMARES



### WORRYING THAT SOMETHING REALLY BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN



**LISTEN**



# LISTEN

## HOW TO LISTEN PROPERLY?

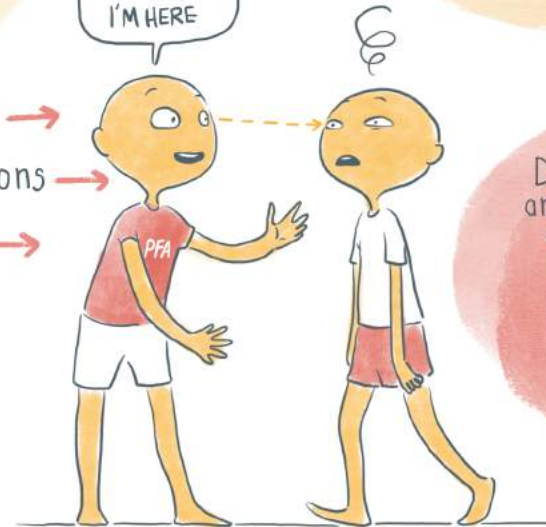
Be aware of words and body language

**LET THEM KNOW YOU'RE HERE**

Some people may not want to speak about what has happened. However, they may value it if you stay with them quietly, or offer practical support like a meal or a glass of water

Eye contact →  
Facial expressions →  
Gestures →

IF YOU NEED TO TALK I'M HERE



Do not pressure anyone to tell you what they have been through



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# 1 APPROACH RESPECTFULLY

CAN I HELP?



Help the person feel comfortable  
Find a safe and quiet place to talk.  
Offer water if you can.

## RESPECT PRIVACY & DIGNITY

- IF APPROPRIATE, KEEP THE PERSON'S STORY CONFIDENTIAL
- TRY TO PROTECT THE PERSON FROM EXPOSURE TO THE MEDIA

# 2 ASK

FIND OUT WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT  
TO THEM AT THIS MOMENT...

PRIORITIZE



...AND HELP THEM WORK OUT  
WHAT THEIR PRIORITIES ARE

I NEED...  
MY CAR TO CALL XYZ  
MY BANK MY MUM  
FEED THE DOG



# 3 LISTEN

AND HELP THEM  
TO FEEL CALM



Be patient and calm

Stay close but  
keep an appropriate  
distance

Listen if they want to talk  
about what happened

Let them know that  
you are listening  
nod your head or say  
"hmmmm..."

# 4 PROVIDE

FACTUAL INFORMATION,  
IF YOU HAVE IT

Be honest about what you  
know and don't

I'LL TRY TO FIND OUT

Acknowledge  
strength

YOU HAVE  
BEEN STRONG

Acknowledge  
feelings & loss

I'M SO SORRY.  
I CAN IMAGINE THIS  
IS VERY SAD FOR YOU

Allow for silence  
to give the person  
time to share

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# DO

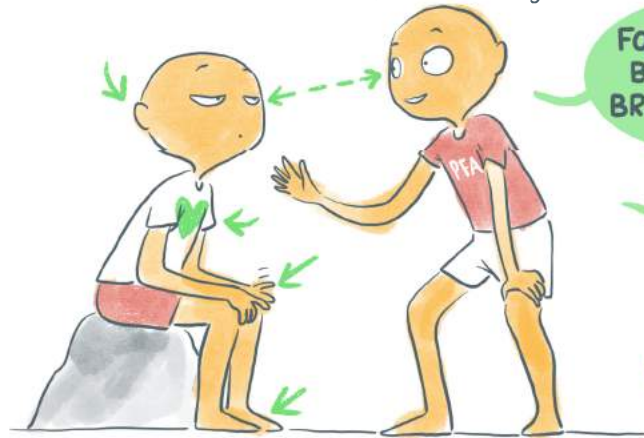
KEEP A CALM & SOFT VOICE

HAVE KIND EYE CONTACT

REMINDE THEM YOU ARE HERE TO HELP

REMINDE THEM THEY ARE SAFE, IF IT'S TRUE

If someone feels out of it, help them to make contact with their current environment & themselves  
You can say the following:



FOCUS ON YOUR BREATHING, BREATH SLOWLY

TAP YOUR FINGERS ON YOUR LAP

PLACE AND FEEL YOUR FEET ON THE FLOOR

Notice some concrete non-distressing things around and say:

WHAT DO YOU SEE HERE? CAN YOU DESCRIBE IT?

# DON'T

Don't interrupt or rush someone's story (don't look at your watch or speak rapidly...)

LET ME TELL YOU!

ARE YOU INSANE?

Don't talk about your own troubles

TELL ME!!!

YOU SHOULDN'T FEEL THAT WAY

Don't make up things you don't know.

I PROMISE YOU...

YOU'RE LUCKY YOU SURVIVED



Don't tell them someone else's story.

I'LL DO IT FOR YOU

Don't think & act as if you must solve all the person's problems

they have to feel their strength and capacity to care for themselves!



LINK



**LINK**

## HELP PEOPLE TO HELP THEMSELVES TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THEIR SITUATION



Follow up with people if you promise to do so

## A PERSON IN DISTRESS CAN FEEL OVERWHELMED...

...Help them to consider their most urgent needs, and how to prioritize and address them.



Being able to manage a few issues will give the person a greater sense of control in the situation and strengthen their own ability to cope!

## ENCOURAGE POSITIVE STRATEGIES



## DISCOURAGE NEGATIVE STRATEGIES



## GIVE INFORMATION

- ✓ Only say what you know
- ✓ Do not make up information or give false reassurances
- ✓ Keep messages simple and accurate
- ✓ Repeat the message to be sure people hear and understand it

Rumours will be common!

Find out where to get correct information & when and where to get updates

# WHAT TO DO?

## CONNECT PEOPLE WITH LOVED ONES & SOCIAL SUPPORT

PEOPLE WHO FEEL THEY HAD GOOD SOCIAL SUPPORT AFTER A CRISIS COPE BETTER THAN THOSE WHO FEEL THEY WERE NOT WELL SUPPORTED



KEEP UPDATED ABOUT:

- ✓ STATE OF THE CRISIS
- ✓ SAFETY ISSUES
- ✓ AVAILABLE SERVICES
- ✓ CONDITION OF MISSING PEOPLE

INFORM PEOPLE ABOUT AVAILABLE SERVICES & HELP THEM ACCESS:

- ✓ HEALTH SERVICES
- ✓ FAMILY TRACING
- ✓ SHELTER
- ✓ FOOD DISTRIBUTION



HELP KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER & CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS AND LOVED ONES



HELP PEOPLE TO CONTACT FRIENDS & RELATIVES TO GET SUPPORT



IF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IS HELPFUL FOR A PERSON, TRY TO CONNECT THEM WITH THEIR SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY



HELP BRING AFFECTED PEOPLE TOGETHER TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER  
FOR EXAMPLE, ASK PEOPLE TO CARE FOR THE ELDERLY



Make sure vulnerable people also know about existing services



**SPECIAL  
NEEDS**



# SPECIAL CARE FOR MEN & WOMEN

ASKING FOR HELP IS NOT A WEAKNESS

STRENGTH DOES NOT MEAN CARRYING THE BURDEN ON YOUR OWN

BEING STRONG MEANS TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF & CARING FOR & ACCEPTING HELP FROM OTHERS

IT'S ALRIGHT TO SHOW EMOTIONS



IT'S IMPORTANT TO CARE OF YOURSELF, SO YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF OTHERS



VIOLENCE IS NEVER ACCEPTABLE, EVEN IN A DISASTER

## CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE IN A CRISIS.  
IT DISRUPTS THEIR FAMILIAR WORLD &  
ROUTINES THAT MAKE THEM FEEL SECURE.

CHILDREN COPE BETTER WHEN THEY HAVE  
A STABLE & CALM ADULT AROUND THEM.

WHEN CHILDREN ARE WITH THEIR  
CAREGIVERS, TRY TO SUPPORT  
THE CAREGIVER.

### ⚡ SPECIFIC DISTRESS REACTIONS

( IN ADDITION TO THE PREVIOUS ONES )

### ✓ THINGS CAREGIVERS CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN

FOR ALL AGES, GIVE THEM  
EXTRA TIME & ATTENTION.

IF POSSIBLE, KEEP TO  
REGULAR ROUTINES & SCHEDULES  
(FOR FOOD, BEDTIME...).

#### INFANTS



- Return to earlier behaviors (ex: bedwetting or thumb-sucking)
- Cling to caregivers
- Reduce their play or use repetitive play related to the distressing event

- Keep them warm and safe
- Keep them away from loud noises and chaos
- Speak in a calm and soft voice
- Give cuddles and hugs

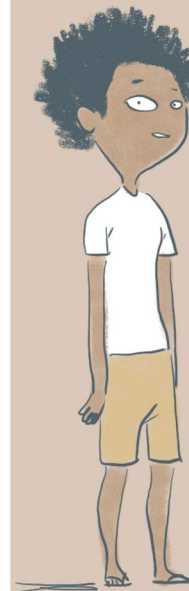
#### SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN



- Believe they caused bad things to happen
- Develop new fears
- Become less affectionate
- Feel alone
- Become preoccupied with protecting or rescuing people

- Remind them often that they are safe
- Explain that they are not to blame for bad things that happened
- Give simple answers about what happened without scary details
- Allow them to stay close to you if they are fearful
- Be patient with children who start demonstrating behaviours they did when they were younger
- Provide a chance to play and relax

#### ADOLESCENTS

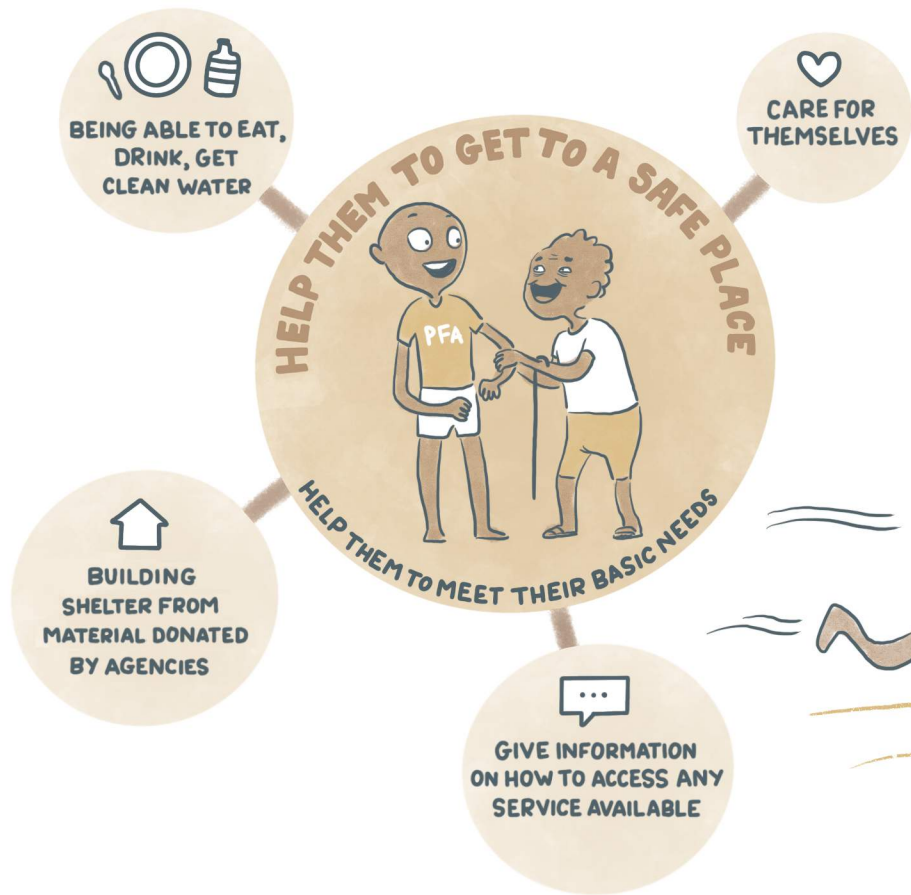


- Feel "nothing"
- Feel different from or isolated from their friends,
- display risk-taking behavior & negative attitudes

- Provide facts about what happened and explain what is going on now
- Allow them to be sad
- Don't expect them to be tough
- Listen to their thoughts & fears without being judgmental
- Set clear rules & expectations
- Ask them about the dangers they face, and discuss how they can be best avoided
- Encourage them to be helpful

# VULNERABLE PEOPLE

PEOPLE WITH HEALTH CONDITIONS, PHYSICAL OR MENTAL DISABILITIES & SOME ELDERLY PEOPLE MAY NEED SPECIAL HELP



ASK PEOPLE IF THEY HAVE ANY HEALTH CONDITIONS OR IF THEY REGULARLY TAKE MEDICATION

HELP PEOPLE GET THEIR MEDICATION OR ACCESS MEDICAL SERVICES



Stay with the person or try to make sure they have someone to help them if you need to leave

Consider linking the person with a protection agency or other relevant support, to help them in the longer term

# TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

As a helper, you may feel responsible for people's safety & care

Remember that you are not responsible for solving everyone's problems

Help people help themselves!

Even during the crisis, take time for yourself.  
Manage stress by having healthy habits:

- Keep reasonable working hours to avoid exhaustion.
- Divide the workload among helpers, working in shifts during the initial recovery phase.
- Take regular rest breaks.

You may witness or experience terrible things (destruction, injury, death or violence) and hear stories of other people's pain and suffering.

All of these experiences can affect you.

Think about what helped you to cope with stress in the past.

Check how fellow helpers are doing. Find ways to support each other.

Talk about your experience of helping in the crisis situation with friends, loved ones or other people you trust for support.

Acknowledge what you were able to do to help, even in small ways. Accept the limits of what you could do in the circumstances.





Psychological First Aid. Stronger Together. A guide to help you and your community  
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