

An Overview of Psychological First Aid (PFA)

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidenced-informed approach for helping individuals, families, and groups who have experienced a potentially traumatic event to reduce distress and cope better in the short term. This is not counselling. It doesn't replace therapy where that is needed. These are just simple helping techniques that can be delivered by anyone with good interpersonal skills and some understanding of what's going on for people facing traumatic situations.

1. Potentially traumatic events

By way of definition, a Potentially Traumatic Event is one that may:

- include a threat to self or others
- be sudden or unexpected
- be prolonged, repeated, and intense
- be personally experienced or witnessed
- include feelings of intense fear, helplessness, powerlessness, being overwhelmed.

We could be talking natural disasters, acts of violence, receiving bad news of a terminal illness...

2. Initial reactions to trauma

The basic premise of Psychological First Aid is that individuals can experience a range of initial reactions to potentially traumatic events, including physical, psychological and behavioural reactions. I would also add spiritual reactions into that mix. For some people, these initial reactions can interfere with their normal ability to function and get on with the business of life.

Physical reactions	Emotional reactions	Cognitive reactions	Behavioural reactions	Spiritual reactions
• persistent fatigue • nausea/vomiting • headaches • excessive sweating • increased heart rate • elevated blood pressure • increased breathing rate • disturbed sleep/nightmares • difficulty falling asleep • stomach pain • dizziness • muscle tension • heightened startle response • nonspecific bodily complaints	• anxiety • guilt • grief • responsibility • confusion/panic • emotional shock • fear • numbness • disconnected • detached • depression • oversensitivity • wary/mistrustful • threatened • irritability/anger	• confusion • poor attention • poor decision making • heightened or lowered alertness • poor concentration • difficulty identifying familiar objects or people • altered awareness of surroundings • poor problem solving • poor abstract thinking • loss of time, place, or person, orientation	• change in social interactions • change in speech patterns • loss or increase of appetite • withdrawal • emotional outbursts • suspiciousness • change in usual communication skills • pacing • startle reflex • hyper alert to environment • alcohol consumption • inability to rest • antisocial acts • erratic movements • change in sexual functioning	• meaninglessness • purposelessness • adrift or directionless • guilt • anxiety or terror • disconnection from systems of care • inner uneasiness, inquiet, restlessness • powerlessness and loss of self-efficacy • frustration or inability to make progress • reluctance to interact with family and friends • depression • despair • loss of confidence • compensatory behaviours *

				• isolation and abandonment • lack of acceptance • relationship problems
* Compensatory behaviours: abuse of power, revenge seeking, engaging in superstitious rituals, embracing conspiracy beliefs...				

The research shows that a person's ability to cope and recover can be improved with some directed help. Psychological First Aid has five guiding principles. These are basically five actions aimed at facilitating better coping. They are flexible. Not every principle is needed every time. They overlap, so often multiple things will be happening at once.

3. Five guiding principles

Principle 1: Promote safety

This refers to both physical and psychological safety.

Psychological safety refers to protecting people from situations that may cause them further distress, such as seeing terrible things, receiving bad news in an insensitive or uncontrolled way, or even being harassed by the media. Actions include removing the person from, or reducing their exposure to, the threat of harm. Go for a walk. Sit in a car with no visibility of incident. Leave the scene.

Physical safety includes not only the threat of injury but also immediate basic needs for food, water, shelter, financial or material assistance, and emergency medical attention if required.

Principle 2: Promote calm and provide comfort

Stabilise people who are overwhelmed or disoriented. Create a calm, quiet space for them that is removed from stressful situations or exposure to sights, sounds and smells of the emergency. Be present and remain calm in the chaos. Normalise and validate their reactions. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

Help people cope with strong emotional reactions using simple psychological techniques like controlled breathing or grounding exercises.

- Controlled breathing: Box breathing
- Controlled breathing: 4-7-8
- Physical grounding: 5-4-3-2-1
- Mental grounding: Count backwards from 100

Listen to people who want to share their stories and emotions, without forcing them to talk. Be friendly and compassionate even if people are being difficult. Provide accurate information about the disaster or trauma and the relief efforts underway to help survivors understand the situation to help ease distress.

Principle 3: Promote a sense of individual and community efficacy

Help affected people to gain a sense of control over their situation. Individuals and communities as the ones best placed to determine what is most beneficial for them, so engage them in meeting their own needs. Assist with decision making, help people to prioritise problems and solve them. Help them gain access to the decision-making resources they might be missing, including:

- Accurate information about what is happening
- The types and locations of available government and non-government services
- Access to social support
- Practical help to address immediate needs, concerns, and logistical complications
- Information on stress management and coping.

I've driven people to a place where they can get the support they need. I've lent them my phone to reach out to family or friends. Facilitating something, even a small thing, increases agency.

Principle 4: Promote connectedness

Connection between people during a time of trauma is important to recovery. Social connections help people solve practical problems through information sharing and help with daily tasks, as well as gaining emotional understanding and acceptance of what has happened. This is particularly important for families with children and adolescents – social connections are critical to the recovery of younger people.

Help people contact friends and loved ones. Keep families together. Keep children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible. Help establish contacts with support people (friends, family or community helping resources). I there any one I can contact for you? Can I introduce you to XXX? Respect cultural norms regarding gender, age, and family structures.

Principle 5: Promote hope

Most of us are unprepared for a very traumatic event, and it can challenge our view of the world as a safe and predictable place. This can lead to a sense of hopelessness, and people can even give up trying. Hope is a vision or belief in a better future beyond the present moment. We can help people, by taking small positive steps, to begin to look forward and envisage that future. Be realistic. Focus on existing strengths, resources, successes, and progress. Convey the expectancy that people will recover. Be present and be willing to help.

References

Australian Red Cross. (2020). *Psychological First Aid: Supporting people affected by disaster in Australia* (3rd ed.). Melbourne: Australian Red Cross and Australian Psychological Society. Retrieved from <https://psychology.org.au/getmedia/1a0384ce-929d-422e-ad33-9c650eb42b91/psychological-first-aid-an-australian-guide.pdf>

Phoenix Australia. (2021). *Psychological First Aid in Bushfire-Impacted Communities – User Manual*. Melbourne: Phoenix Australia - Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health.