

Psychological First Aid

Field Worker's Guide

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Foreword

This guide was developed in order to have widely agreed upon psychological first aid material for use in developing countries. The material included in this guide is compiled from various internationally approved references mentioned at the end of this booklet. The author, Dr. Vinod Singaravelu, has brought the relevant information in a comprehensive format for easy understanding and training purposes. The author does not claim ownership of the information in this material. The author is willing for this material to be used, as necessary for non-commercial purposes, by the field workers or to train them to deliver Psychological First Aid in disaster situation.

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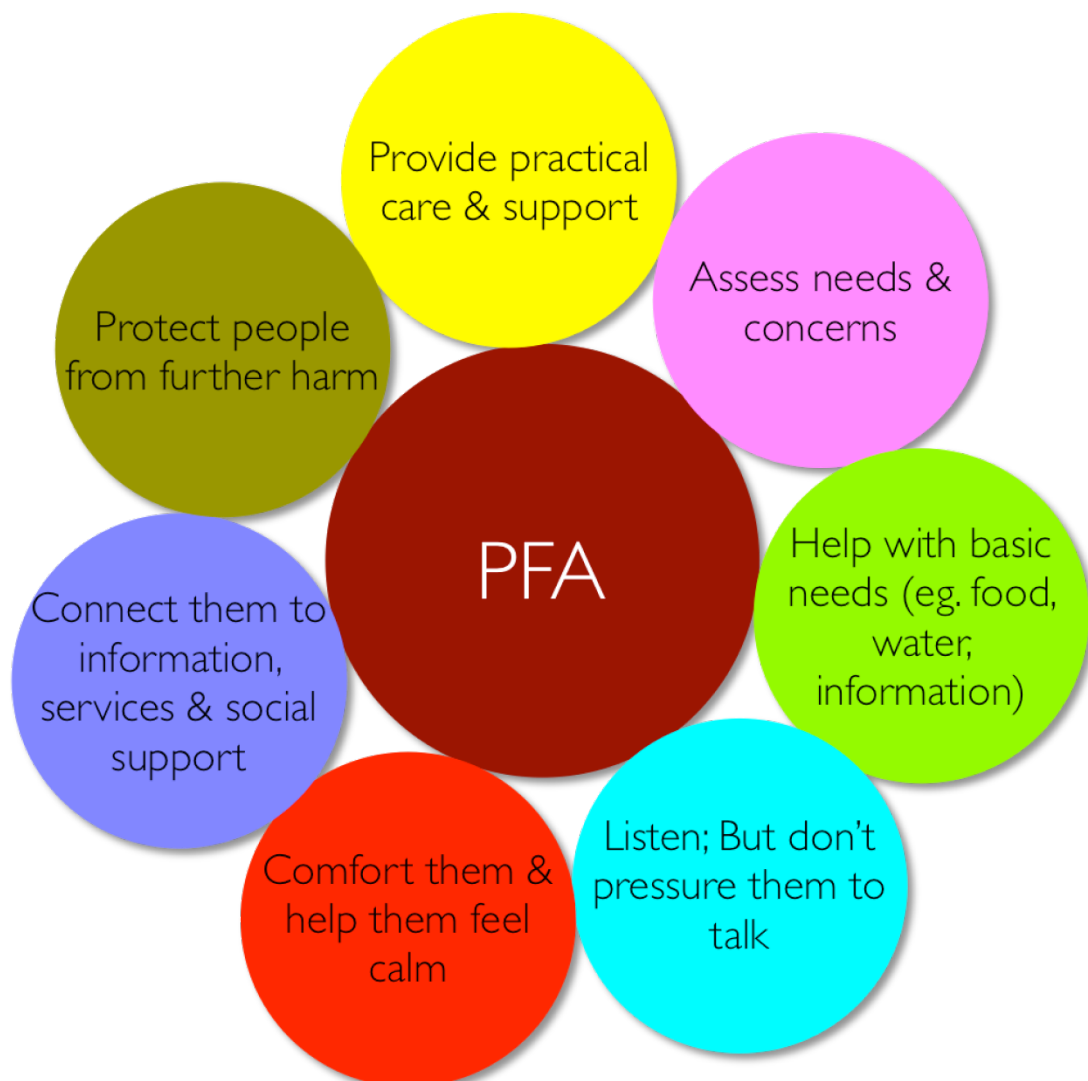
Psychological First Aid: Field workers Guide

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What is Psychological First Aid (PFA)?

PFA is a humane, supportive response to a fellow human being who is suffering and who may need support. It is an acute intervention of choice when responding to the psychosocial needs of children, adults and families affected by disaster and terrorism. It is designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster immediate and long term adaptive functioning and coping.

It involves the following 7 themes:



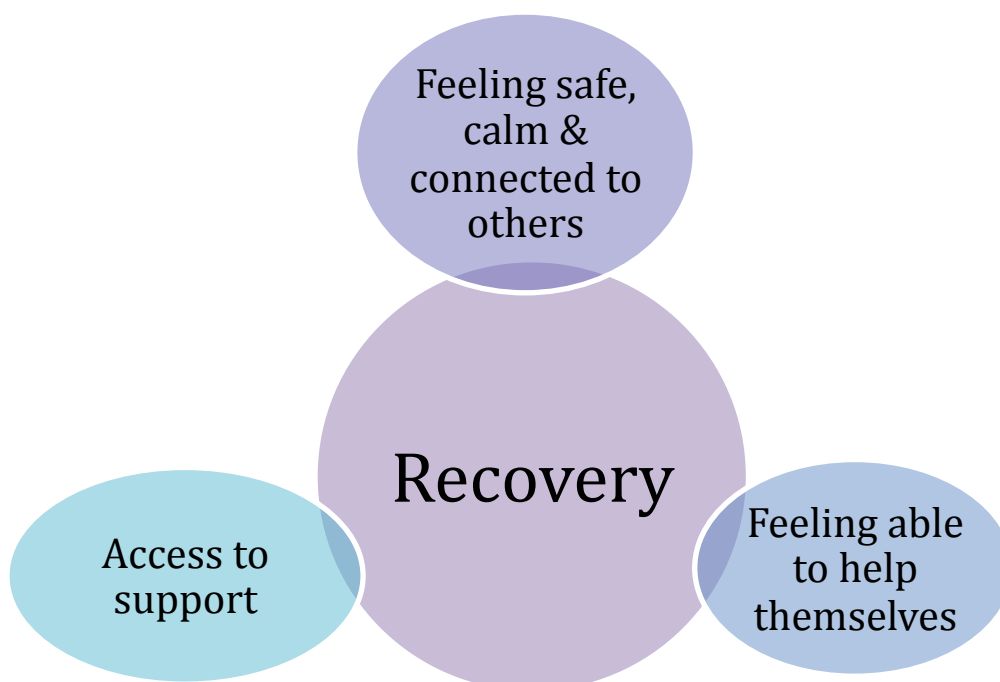
What it is NOT?

Psychological First Aid is

- NOT Psychological debriefing
- NOT obtaining details of traumatic experiences and losses
- NOT treating
- NOT labeling or diagnosing
- NOT counseling
- NOT something that only professionals can do
- NOT something that everybody who has been affected by an emergency will need.

It is not useful, and may be harmful, to ask a disaster survivor to systematically recount their perceptions, thoughts and emotional reactions during a recent stressful event.

3 helpful factors for long-term recovery:



Who is PFA for?

PFA does not assume that all survivors will develop severe mental health problems or long-term difficulties in recovery. Instead, it is based on an understanding that disaster survivors will experience a broad range of early reactions (eg. physical, psychological, behavioural, or spiritual) Some of these reactions might cause enough distress to interfere with adaptive coping and their recovery may be helped by PFA.

PFA is for distressed people who have been recently exposed to a serious crisis event. It involves people of all ages, including children.

Do not force help on people who do not want it, but make yourself easily available to those who may want support.

People who need special attention & support (At Risk Population):

- People with serious life-threatening injury need emergency medical care
- People who are too upset that they cannot care for themselves or their children
- People who may hurt themselves
- People who may hurt others
- Children & Adolescents – particularly those separated from their caregivers – need protection from abuse and exploitation.
- People with health conditions or mental and physical disabilities – take them to a safe place, protect them from abuse, help them access medical care & other services – this

includes elderly people, pregnant women, severe mental disorder, or people with visual or hearing difficulties

- People at risk of discrimination or violence – eg. women or people of certain ethnic groups, may need special protection to be safe in the crisis setting.
- People with substance abuse problems
- Mothers with babies and small children
- Those with significant loss of possessions (home, family etc)
- Those exposed first hand to grotesque scenes or extreme life threat.

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

- Physical symptoms – eg. 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 (eg. having survived, or for not helping or saving others)
- 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 (eg. not knowing their name, where they are from or what happened)

- Not being able to care for themselves or their children (eg. not eating or drinking, not able to make simple decisions)

Most people will recover well over time, especially if they can restore their basic needs and receive appropriate support and PFA.

Make sure that severely distressed people are not left alone and try to keep them safe until the reaction passes or until you can find help from health personnel, local leaders or other community members in the area.

When & Where is PFA provided?

PFA is aimed at people who have been recently affected by a crisis event. You can provide PFA when you first have contact with very distressed people. This is usually during or immediately after an event.

PFA is designed for delivery in diverse settings. You can provide PFA in shelters, field hospitals, camps, acute care facilities (emergency departments), respite centers for first responders or other relief workers, crisis hotlines, feeding locations, family reception and assistance centers, homes, businesses, schools, evacuation centers and other community settings.

Ideally try to provide PFA where you can have some privacy to talk with the person when appropriate. Privacy is essential for confidentiality and to respect the person's dignity, for those who have been exposed to certain types of crisis events such as sexual violence.

How is PFA provided?

Basic objectives:

- Establish a human connection in a non-intrusive, compassionate manner
- Enhance immediate and ongoing safety, and provide physical & emotional comfort
- Calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed or distraught survivors
- Help survivors to tell you specifically what their immediate needs & concerns are, and gather additional information as appropriate
- Offer practical assistance and information to help survivors address their immediate needs and concerns
- Connect survivors as soon as possible to social support networks, including family members, friends, neighbours, and community helping resources.
- Support adaptive coping, acknowledge coping efforts and strengths, and empower survivors; encourage adults, children, and families to take an active role in their recovery
- Provide information that may help survivors cope effectively with the psychological impact of disasters
- Be clear about your availability, and (when appropriately) link the survivor to another member of a disaster response team or to local recovery systems, mental health services, public-sector services, and organizations.
- Calm people, reduce distress, make people feel safe and secure
- Help people understand the disaster and its context

- Help people identify own strengths and abilities to cope; and foster belief in people's ability to cope. Give hope.
- Assist with early screening for people needing further or specialized help
- Get people through the first period of high intensity and uncertainty.
- Set people up to be able to naturally recover from an event
- Reduce the chance of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)

Who delivers it?

PFA should be delivered by appropriate agencies as part of state, regional/district or local emergency management plans. Responses can be undertaken in a coordinated manner, and the psychosocial support can be provided as a key part of the emergency response.

This could include: health & allied health professionals, volunteers, teachers, members of clergy & other faith-based organization, Red Cross volunteers and other trained responders from community organization & local government staff. Most people responding to an emergency are able to provide this type of assistance, comfort and support to people in distress.

Good Communication

At times of distress people who have been through a crisis event may be very upset, anxious or confused. Good communication is vital at these times. Stay calm and show understanding of the situation and their experience. Be open to listen to someone's story but do not

force them to tell you. Keep your language simple; communicate well with words and body language appropriate to their culture, age, gender, religion and custom. Always be considerate and Respectful of disaster survivors and follow the below Ethical Do's and Don'ts.

| Do's | Don'ts |
|--|--|
| Be honest and trustworthy | Don't exploit your relationship as a helper |
| Be aware of and set aside your own biases and prejudices | Don't ask the person for any money or favour for helping them |
| Make it clear to people that even if they refuse help now, they can still access help in the future. | Don't make false promises or give false information. Don't exaggerate your skills |
| Behave appropriately by considering the person's culture, age and gender. | Don't force help on people, and don't be intrusive or pushy. |
| Find a quiet place to talk, and minimize outside distraction | Don't pressure someone to tell their story |
| Respect people's right to make their own decisions. | Don't interrupt or rush someone's story (eg. don't look at your watch or speak too rapidly) |
| Respect privacy and keep the person's story confidential if this is appropriate | Don't touch the person if you're not sure it is appropriate to do so. |
| Stay near the person but keep an appropriate distance depending on their age, gender & culture | 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". |

| | |
|---|--|
| Let them know you are listening: eg. Nod your head or say 'hmm...' | Don't make up things you don't know |
| Be patient and calm | Don't use terms that are too technical |
| 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". | Don't tell them someone else's story |
| Give information in a way the person can understand – keep it simple. | Don't talk about your own troubles |
| 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" | Don't think and act as if you must solve all the person's problems for them. |
| Acknowledge the person's strengths and how they have helped themselves. | Don't take away the person's strength and sense of being able to care for themselves |
| Allow for silence | Don't talk about people in negative terms (eg. don't call them 'crazy' or 'mad') |

Adapt your approach according to the cultural differences whilst preparing for PFA.

Be mindful of the

- Dress code;
- Language used to greet people and the language they speak
- Gender & Age – should affected women only be approached by women helpers?
- Power – Is there a family or community head who you need to approach?
- Physical contact – Is touching appropriate to their custom? Are there special things to consider in terms of behaviour around the elderly, children, women or others?
- Religion & beliefs – What beliefs or practices are important to the people affected? How might they understand or explain what has happened based on their religious or other beliefs?
- Limitations – both yours and theirs: eg. Language barrier, hard of hearing, mentally challenged, lack of education and age related developmental stage for children.
 - Use simple to understand language, avoid jargons, speak at the eye level of children, use other means of communication if needed, use translators when needed, help the caregivers or parents who could then help their dependants.

Example of how you may initially approach a family to introduce yourself and ask about their immediate needs:

Towards Adult/Caregiver:

*Hello. My name is _____. I work with _____.
I'm checking in with people to see how they are doing, and to see if I can help in any way. Is it okay if I talk to you for a few minutes? May I ask your name? Mrs. Sharma, before we talk, is there something right now that you need, like some water or fruit juice?*

Towards Adolescent/Child:

And is this your daughter? (Get on child's eye level, smile and greet the child, using her/his name and speaking softly.)

Hi Pooja, I'm _____ and I'm here to try to help you and your family. Is there anything you need right now? There is some water and juice over there, and we have a few blankets and toys in those boxes

Well prepared is half done!

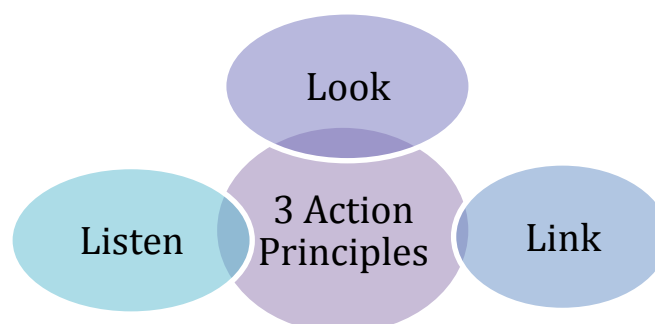
Before entering a crisis site learn about the following **[CSS]**:

- **Crisis event** – What happened? When & where it took place?
Who and how many people are likely to be affected?
- **Support services** – Who is providing the basic needs (food, water & shelter), emergency medical care and tracing family members? Where & how can people access those services?
Who else is helping? Any community members involved?
- **Safety concerns** – Is the crisis over or continuing? What dangers may be in the environment (rebels, landmines or damaged infrastructure)? Are there areas to avoid entering because they are not secure or because you are not allowed to be there?

Once you are well prepared follow the 3 action principles of PFA.

ACTION PRINCIPLES

LOOK, LISTEN AND LINK



LOOK:

Check for safety, People with obvious urgent basic needs, and people with serious distress reactions.

Crisis situations can change rapidly. You may not have enough time to prepare adequately or the scene may be different from what you learned before you enter the site. Be calm, be safe and think before you act. Consider following questions as you “look” around you:

1. **SAFETY:** What dangers can you see in the environment (active conflict, damaged roads, unstable building etc)? Can you be there without likely harm to yourself or others?
 - a. If you are uncertain about the safety then do not go. Try to get help for people in need. If possible, communicate with people in distress from a safe distance until appropriate help arrives.
2. **BASIC NEEDS:** Look for anyone critically injured and need immediate emergency medical help? Does anyone seem to need rescuing from being trapped or from immediate danger? Who needs urgent basic needs (food, water, shelter)? Who needs basic needs and special attention to be protected from discrimination, abuse and violence? Who else around me need help?
 - a. Know your role and your limits.
 - b. Get help for people who need special assistance or who have obvious urgent basic needs.
 - c. Refer critically injured people to medical care/physical first aid.
3. **SERIOUS DISTRESS REACTION:** Are there anyone who is extremely upset, not able to move on their own, not responding

to others, who might harm themselves or others or in shock?

Where and who are the most distressed people?

- a. Prioritize accordingly and provide PFA; Do not leave them alone, try to keep them safe until the reaction passes or until you find help from health personnel or other community members in the area.

LISTEN:

Approach people who may need support. Ask about people's needs and concerns. Listen to people and help them to feel calm. Follow the above-mentioned Do's and Don'ts as a guide.

1. Help them feel comfortable – eg. offer water
2. Take them to a safer place
3. Protect from exposure to the media for their privacy & dignity.
4. Ask for their specific needs and concerns
5. Help them work out what their priorities are.
6. Stay close to the person
7. Do not force them to talk but listen in case they want to talk about what happened.
8. Be a role model – Stay calm, speak slowly and help them feel calm.
 - a. If someone feels unreal or disconnected from their surrounding as a distress reaction, it may help them to make contact with their current immediate environment and themselves.

For eg. Ask them to feel their feet on the floor, tap their fingers or hands on their lap, notice some non-distressing things in their environment (sound, vision,

and feeling) Have them tell you what they see or hear.
Encourage them to focus on their breathing and to
breathe slowly.

LINK: (Major part of PFA)

Help people address basic needs, access services and cope with their problems. Give them information of the crisis event, support services available, and how to seek help. Connect people with loved ones and social support. Make sure vulnerable or marginalized people are not overlooked. Follow up with people if you promise to do so.

Linking people with practical support is a major part of PFA. PFA is often a short time and one time intervention. So help people to notice their strengths & help themselves and to regain control of their situation. 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.

Consider the following:

- Address basic needs & access services – eg. food, water, shelter and sanitation.
- Link people with specific services for special needs – mother with young baby needing to be fed, health care concerns etc.
- Affirm people’s ability to cope with the current situation
- Give practical suggestions for them to meet their own needs
- Encourage people to use their ‘positive’ coping strategies – eg. Enough rest, spending time with family, adequate self care,

doing activities to relax, finding safe ways to help others in the crisis.

- Discourage 'negative' coping strategies – eg. Taking illicit drugs, alcohol or smoking; Sleeping all day; Working all the time without rest; Isolated from friends and families; Self neglect; engaging in violence, etc.
- Give information: There may be rumors in crisis situation. Might be useful to give information to the groups of affected people so that everyone hears the same message.
 - Give information on the event, their families, their safety, their rights, and how to access support they need.
 - If you do not know all the information do not make up information or give false reassurance instead tell them that you will find out about it and follow it through or guide them to the place/person where they can find those information.
- Connect with loved ones and social support
 - People with good social support after a crisis cope better than those who feel they were not well supported.
 - Linking people with loved ones and support is an important part of PFA.
 - Keep families together and keep children with their parents.
 - If prayers and religious practice helps someone link them with their spiritual community.
 - Help bring affected people together to help each other.

People who need special attention

1. Children, including adolescents:

- Crisis events often disrupt their familiar world (people, places and routine) that makes them feel secure.
- They are at risk of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation (child trafficking/recruitment into rebel armed forces etc)
- Young children are particularly vulnerable as they cannot meet their basic needs or protect themselves and their caregivers may be overwhelmed by the crisis.
- How children react to the crisis depends on their age and developmental stage. It also depends on how their caregivers cope and interact with them.
- Children cope better when they have a stable, calm adult around them.
- Specific distress reactions:
 - Young children: reoccurrences of earlier behaviour – eg. Bedwetting, cling to caregivers, or reduce their play.
 - School-age children: may believe bad things may happen, develop new fears, feel alone, or preoccupied with rescuing people in crisis
 - Adolescents: may feel “nothing”, isolated from friends or risk taking behaviour and negative attitudes.

- Important first step is to reunite separated children, including adolescents, with their families. Try to link immediately with a trustworthy child protection agency that can begin the process of registering the child and ensuring they are cared for.
- When they are with caregivers, try to support the caregivers in taking care of their own children.
- Listen to children's view on their situation
- Try to talk to them on their eye level and use words & explanations they can understand.
- When safe to do so, support children to engage in play activities or conversations about their interests - helps with relaxing and coping.
- Allow adolescents to be sad. Don't expect them to be tough.
- Encourage and allow opportunities for them to be helpful, but also support them and discuss how they can avoid being harmed.
- Finding safe ways for them to contribute in the situation may help them to feel more in control

2. People with health conditions or physical or mental disabilities:

- Basic PFA action principles applies here as well.
- Get them to a safe place, connect with basic support and health care, and support them to take care of themselves.

- Some health conditions need special medical and psychological care – high blood pressure, heart condition, asthma, anxiety and other mental disorders.
- Pregnant women may experience severe stress from the crisis that could affect the pregnancy.
- People with limited mobility or sight or hearing will have difficulties finding their family members or accessing support services.
- Ensure they get their safety, basic needs and immediate health needs are met. Stay with them and make sure they have someone with them if you need to leave.
- Consider linking them with a protection agency or relevant support to help them in the longer term.
- Give information on how to access any available services.

3. People at risk of discrimination or violence:

- These include – women, people from certain ethnic or religious groups, and people with mental disabilities.
 - They may be overlooked when basic needs are provided
 - They may be left out of decisions about aid, services or where to go
 - They may be targeted for violence including sexual violence and exploitation.
- They need special care to ensure their safety. Connect with loved ones and give information on available services.

Remember all people have resources to cope including those who are vulnerable. Help them use their own coping resources and strengths.

Take care of yourself

You can best get ready to be a helper in crisis situation by:

1. Preparing well – learn about crisis situation, roles & responsibilities of different kind of helpers.
2. Consider your own health – both physical and psychological. Learn to manage your stress and have a healthy balanced work & personal life habits.
3. You cannot help everyone and at all the times. So make an honest decision about whether you are ready to help in this particular crisis and at this particular time.

MANAGE YOUR STRESS:

- Think what has helped you cope in the past and what you can do to stay strong.
- Take time to eat, rest and relax, even for short periods
- Keep reasonable working hours so you do not become too exhausted. Work in shifts and take regular rest periods.
- People may have problems after the crisis event – eg. feeling inadequate or frustrated when you cannot help people with all of their problems. Remember, you are human too – you are not responsible for solving ALL of people's problems. Do what you can to help people help themselves
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine or nicotine, if possible or at least minimize them;
- Check your fellow helpers to see how they are managing and have them check in with you.

- Find ways to support each other. Talk with friends, loved ones and people you trust for support.

REST AND REFLECT:

- Take time to rest and reflect your experience. This is an important part of ending your helping role.
- To help your own recovery:
 - Talk about your experience of helping in the crisis situation with a colleague or someone you trust
 - Acknowledge what you were able to do to help others, even in small ways.
 - Learn to reflect on and accept what you did well, what did not go very well, and the limits of what you could do in the circumstances
 - Take some time, if possible, to rest and relax before beginning your work and life duties again.
 - Speak to a health care professional if you find yourself struggling to cope with the stresses from your role as helper.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Politely observe first; don't intrude. Then ask simple respectful questions to determine how you may help
- Often, the best way to make contact is to provide practical assistance (food, water, blankets)
- Initiate contact only after you have observed the situation and the person or family, and have determine that contact is not likely to be intrusive or disruptive.
- Be prepared that survivors will either avoid you or flood you with contact.
- Speak calmly. Be patient, responsive, and sensitive.
- Speak slowly, in simple concrete terms; don't use jargons or acronyms.
- If survivors want to talk, be prepared to listen. When you listen, focus on hearing what they want to tell you, and how you can be of help.
- Acknowledge the positive features of what the survivor has done to keep safe.
- Give information that directly addresses the survivor's immediate goals and clarify answers repeatedly as needed.
- Give information that is accurate and age-appropriate.
- When communicating through a translator or interpreter, look at and talk to the person you are addressing, not at the translator or interpreter.

- Remember that the goal of PFA is to reduce distress, assist with current needs, and promote adaptive functioning, not to elicit details of traumatic experiences and losses.
- Do not “debrief” by asking for details of what happened.
- Do not assume that everyone exposed to a disaster will be traumatized. Do not pathologize.
- Know the situation and prepare adequately before you enter the crisis environment.
- Remember 3 Action Principles: LOOK – LISTEN – LINK
- Remember 7 Themes of PFA:
 - Provide practical care and support
 - Assess needs and concerns
 - Help people to address basic needs
 - Listen but do not force them to talk
 - Comfort and help them feel calm
 - Connect with services and information
 - Protect people from further harm
- Remember certain people are more distressed or disabled needing specific attention and special care.
- Respect people’s privacy and dignity. Maintain confidentiality.
- Follow the Ethical Do’s and Don’ts.
- Good communication is vital.
- When speaking to children speak to them at eye level, use age-appropriate language. Support the caregivers to take care of their dependants.
- Help people to help themselves and to regain control of their situation. Remember that all people have resources to cope, including those who are vulnerable. Help vulnerable people to

use their own coping resources and strategies. This applies to children & adolescents too.

- People recover better when they feel they had good social support. Link them with family & friends and available support services. Always keep children with their caregivers.
- If possible, explain to the person that you are leaving, when you finish your role, and if someone else will be helping them from that point on, try and introduce them to that person.
- Remember, you are human too, so take care of yourself. Take regular rest and reflect on your experience with your colleague.

“PREPARE – LOOK – LISTEN – LINK – REST – REFLECT”

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