

Psychological First Aid NYS OVS - October 25, 2022

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Why Train in Psychological First Aid?

- Disasters and crises are increasing in frequency and intensity, as is general stress
- They impact all involved:
 - Direct survivors/victims
 - Their friends and families
 - Community members
 - Responders



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Impact of Stress and Crisis

- Resulting emotional reactions impact people's behavior and decision-making – typically not for the better
- Understanding and addressing those reactions using Psychological First Aid (PFA) can help prevent early stress reactions from turning into more serious emotional issues, and help you do your work more effectively!



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PFA: A Universal Intervention

- PFA can be used to help anyone – children, adolescents, adults, the elderly; families and individuals; victims and professional responders
- Can be used anywhere and at any point in the response and recovery cycle
- Less a specific intervention than a supportive attitude that can underlie all of your interactions



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PFA: A Universal Intervention

- PFA isn't meant to fix every problem in a person's life, only needs generated by the stressful or traumatic experience
- Entirely focused on the here and now
- Goal is to address survivors' immediate needs, both physical and emotional, to help them return as quickly as possible to their pre-disaster functioning



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PFA: A Universal Intervention

- Anyone can practice PFA; no mental health background required
- **Similar to physical first aid** – anyone can learn basic skills
- Also essential to recognize limits of those skills and understand when to hand survivor over to a professional....



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Remember to Know Your Limits

- Recognize what you can and can't do in terms of comfort and competence
- Be aware of mental health resources for those in greater need
- Don't feel bad that you can't address every need you encounter
- Respect the wishes of those who don't want your help



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Reactions to Stress and Trauma

- **Emotional:** Anxiety, depression, irritability, anger, vulnerability, tearfulness
- **Behavioral:** Social withdrawal, avoidance, neediness, self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, altered sex drive
- **Physical:** Jumpiness, breathlessness, digestive problems, fatigue, sleep disruption, headaches
- **Cognitive:** Rumination, preoccupation, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating
- **Spiritual:** Hopelessness, loss of faith, questioning benevolence



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Reactions to Stress and Trauma

- **Shame** - damage to one's sense of personal quality, sense that the self is defective
- **Guilt** - sense one may have harmed someone or violated an important code
 - Guilt due to absence: I should have been there to help
 - Performance guilt: I could have done more to help others
 - Survivor guilt: Why did I live when others didn't?



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Psychological
First Aid

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Defining Psychological First Aid

Evidence-informed and pragmatically oriented early interventions that address acute stress reactions and immediate needs for survivors and emergency responders in the period immediately following a disaster

(NIMH, 2002)



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Elements of Psychological First Aid

- PFA is not a process, but a toolkit of components to be used as needed, in any order appropriate
- Depending on your role and timing in a response you may be more or less likely to use certain elements
- It's still useful to understand the full range of possible PFA actions you might use to support survivors, as well as colleagues



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Providing comfort care

Recognizing basic needs and helping to solve problems

Validating survivors' feelings and thoughts

Connecting people with their support systems

Providing accurate and timely information

Providing education about stress reactions

Reinforcing strengths and positive coping strategies

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Providing Comfort Care: Being Calm

- Crises
- increase physical and emotional arousal, and anxiety is contagious
- If you can stay calm while interacting with survivors, that will often help them calm down
- It can be difficult not to take on others' emotions yourself, so be sure to keep breathing deeply



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Providing Comfort Care: Warmth and Genuineness

- Try to be warm and kind in all interactions
- Be attentive and use a soothing tone of voice – no matter what the survivor says



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Providing Comfort Care: Warmth and Genuineness

- Mind your body language:
- Sit or stand at eye level with the person you're speaking to and face them directly with an open posture
- Make eye contact, unless that makes them uncomfortable
- Try to remain focused on the conversation – avoid scanning the room for other issues or people in need



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**Recognizing Basic Needs:
Attending to Safety Needs**

- Survivors need to feel they and their loved ones are safe to begin their recovery
- Protect survivors from any threat or danger from an ongoing situation, especially if they're disoriented and can't care for themselves
- Support stability by encouraging families to maintain their routines



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**Recognizing Basic Needs:
Assisting with Problem Solving**

- Survivors are often distracted and confused, and may struggle with decisions they could usually handle
- Try to guide people towards productive choices, but still involve the survivor in decision-making
- If possible, frame questions in terms of choices rather than using open-ended language



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Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts

- Surviving a disaster, crime, or other significant trauma is a new and confusing experience for most people
- You may be able to help them identify or express their feelings
- The fact that others suffered worse losses doesn't minimize the impact of that individual's own losses



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**Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts:
Providing Acknowledgment and Recognition**

- Survivors need acknowledgment that they've experienced a trauma and their stress reactions are understandable
- Media presence can suggest that the situation deserves public attention, but can also seem intrusive or insensitive



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**Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts:
Expressing Empathy**

- Empathy is the ability to understand what someone is feeling it, **without feeling it yourself**
- If survivors want to describe what happened to them, be prepared to listen
- Do NOT push them to talk – that can be unhelpful if someone isn't ready to confront their memories



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**Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts:
Expressing Empathy**

- If they do talk about it with you, be aware you may be exposed to their pain, loss, hopelessness, rage, shock, and other intense emotions
- It's important to have a plan for how you'll cope with your own reactions to what you hear, such as speaking with your supervisor or other source of personal support



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**Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts:
Expressing Empathy**

These phrases express empathy and help you make sure you understand what the survivor is trying to say:

- "I hear you saying..."
- "It sounds like..."
- "It seems to you..."
- "You appear..."

If you get it wrong, just apologize and ask the survivor to clarify their point



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**Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts:
Expressing Empathy**

These phrases should be avoided:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| • "Don't feel bad." | • "I know how you feel!" |
| • "Don't cry." | • "It's God's will." |
| • "Try not to think about it." | • "It could be worse." |
| • "Let's talk about something else." | • "At least you still have...." |
| | • "At least [anything]." |

They mean well, but feel dismissive or invalidating to the survivor.



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**Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts:
Expressing Empathy**

- If survivors tell their stories or discuss painful feelings, don't leave them alone and upset
- Be sure they've calmed down or that trusted family and friends arrive before leaving them, or connect them with a mental health professional or spiritual care helper



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Connecting People with Their Support Systems

Most survivors receive far more comfort from their existing support networks than from any kind of professional intervention, so reconnecting them with loved ones is a key PFA goal

Social support can be:

- Instrumental
- Emotional
- Informational



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**Connecting People with Their Support Systems:
Helping Clients Identify Social Support**

- If possible, survivors should be physically reunited with loved ones
- Some may resist reaching out, not wanting to be a burden – ask “what would you want if the roles were reversed?”



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**Connecting People with Their Support Systems:
Helping Clients Avoid Negative Support**

- Not all relationships are supportive – they can be sources of stress and misery
- When you encourage survivors to reach out, first try to be sure that these contacts will not cause additional stress



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Providing Accurate and Timely Information

Accurate information is an important antidote for the uncertainty and anxiety survivors experience after a disaster

- They'll need different kinds of information:
- What happened? Who was responsible?
 - Is it truly over?
 - Is the perpetrator still out there?
 - What happens next?
 - What recovery resources are available?



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Providing Accurate and Timely Information

- Be aware of any up-to-date lists of available resources
- Present information in simple language and provide it in writing if possible
- Be sure never to give out unconfirmed news, or share information you're not authorized to – it's far better to say "I don't know" than to unintentionally mislead someone



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Providing Education About Stress Reactions

Survivors often feel overwhelmed by their own emotional reactions to the disaster

Education can:

- Normalize these reactions
- Explain why they make sense given the circumstances
- Suggest ways to reduce and manage this stress

This "psychoeducation" is an important element of PFA but can also be provided at any time



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Providing Education About Stress Reactions

- Don't force information on those who don't want it yet
- Do educate parents about stress reactions in children, who often regress developmentally and become more needy or clingy than usual
- This can increase the parent's patience and understanding that the child's demands are probably temporary



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Reinforcing Strengths and Positive Coping Strategies

- It's important to acknowledge and support a survivor's strength, competence, courage, and power to begin to restore a sense of control
- You can ask: "How have you gotten through tough times before?" or "What skills do you have that will allow you to get through this?"
- If appropriate, involve survivors in response activities/supporting others



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Reinforcing Strengths and Positive Coping Strategies

- Survivors can be warned about ways of coping that make them feel better temporarily but don't really help in the long run
- Encourage them to use ways that help them both **feel** and **function** better



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Reinforcing Strengths and Positive Coping Strategies

Effective Ways of Coping

- Getting enough sleep
- Taking breaks
- Eating a healthy diet
- Connecting with others
- Limiting TV exposure
- Exercising
- Allowing yourself to receive as well as give
- Using spiritual resources
- Balancing work, play, and rest



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Reinforcing Strengths and Positive Coping Strategies

Ineffective Ways of Coping

- Not getting enough rest or sleep
- Overworking
- Binge eating
- Isolating yourself from other
- Watching too much television
- Drinking and smoking
- Attempting to regain a sense of control by becoming overly controlling or bullying those around you



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Some Cautions When Using PFA

- Remember: Goal is to help survivors return to baseline functioning, not fix all of their problems
- Survivors of a crisis should not be treated identically; individual needs and cultural differences must be respected
- Some survivors prefer the comfort and support of peers or clergy, while others work their problems out alone or only want support from family members



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DON'T	DO
Over-promise or over-reassure	Be realistic in your assurances
Minimize the survivor's losses or make comparisons to other survivors	Validate the survivor's feelings
Change the subject	Stay with the survivor's focus
Fill up silence with chatter	Learn to tolerate silence
Take survivor anger or frustration personally	Accept that they're venting and it's not really aimed at you

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**Psychological First Aid In Action:
Hospital Waiting Room**

- Providing comfort care
- Recognizing basic needs and helping to solve problems
- Validating survivors' feelings and thoughts
- Connecting people with their support systems
- Providing accurate and timely information
- Providing education about stress reactions
- Reinforcing strengths and positive coping strategies

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEv5VwKEYwk>



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Questions? Comments?

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