

# Psychological First Aid: Supporting Others in Managing Stress

Amy Nitza, Ph.D.

Director

Institute for Disaster Mental Health

at SUNY New Paltz

# Psychological First Aid: Supporting Others in Managing Stress

Amy Nitza, Ph.D.

Director

Institute for Disaster Mental Health

at SUNY New Paltz



# Training Objectives

- Review the range of typical reactions that we expect to see in survivors following a disaster, including during COVID-19
- Understand what Psychological First Aid (PFA) is and why early support in the form of PFA can be beneficial to those experiencing distress following a disaster or traumatic event, including during COVID-19
- Learn the elements of PFA

# Typical Reactions to Disasters & Stressful Events

# Range of Reactions

- Helpers and survivors may be surprised by how varied individual responses to disaster can be
- Not only will each person experience a different combination of reactions, but those reactions also change, leading to differences in individuals over time
- These responses can be intense and distressing for those experiencing them
- Usually over time these reactions will fade away for most people, becoming less frequent and less intense
- However, some people don't experience this recovery, or their early symptoms are so strong that they really need professional mental health support

# Reactions by Type

- Emotional
  - A range of emotions
  - Feeling “too much” or “not enough”
  - Emotional dysregulation
- Cognitive
  - Disruption in normal executive functions
  - Negative self-talk, “irrational beliefs”
  - Guilt & Shame
- Behavioral
  - Avoidance
  - Interpersonal
  - Hypervigilance
- Physical
  - Symptoms associated with stress hormones
  - Somatization
  - Sleep disturbance
- Spiritual

# Outbreak-Specific Stressors: General Uncertainty & Unfamiliarity

- Threat is invisible, with unclear timing of effects (both personal and societal)
- Impact is unpredictable (obviously serious, but not clear how serious it will get)
- Unprecedented use of social distancing is creating both practical and emotional stress
- Rapidly changing and sometimes conflicting information from authorities adds confusion

# Outbreak-Specific Stressors: General Uncertainty & Unfamiliarity



Result: Constant need to adapt, with ratcheting up of our baseline stress levels caused by activation of each change in response measures!



# Psychological First Aid: What & Why

# Defining PFA

**PFA is not a “clinical or emergency psychiatric intervention. Rather, it is a description of a humane, supportive response to a fellow human being who is suffering and who may need support.”**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (2007)

# Why Train in PFA?

Understanding *why* people react the ways they do under stress will increase your ability to cope with strong emotions that might otherwise feel troubling, frustrating, or challenging.

# PFA: A Universal Intervention

- PFA can be used to help anyone – children, adolescents, adults, the elderly; families and individuals; disaster survivors, professional responders, clients, colleagues
- 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

# PFA: A Universal Intervention

- Anyone can practice PFA; no mental health background required
  - Similar to physical first aid – anyone can learn basic skills
- Also need to recognize limits of those skills and understand when to refer to a professional

# PFA Characteristics

- Short-term; here and now
- Focus on interrelated practical, physical, and emotional needs
- Goal is to remove any barriers to survivors' natural recovery processes and to provide basic, immediate supportive care
- Promotion of recovery to pre-event level of functioning, not opening up past wounds for examination
- 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

# Knowing how to provide PFA can help you to:

- Create a compassionate environment for disaster survivors and workers.
- Provide immediate support to those in stressful situations.
- Help others cope in the face of stressful events.
- Help activate people's natural recovery processes.
- Reduce the risk of longer-term negative outcomes.

# PFA Elements



# Evidence-Based Principles of Early Intervention

Intervention and prevention efforts should include:

- Promoting sense of safety
  - Removal of actual or perceived threats to reduce physiological responses to fear and anxiety
- Promoting calm
  - Once the immediate danger has passed, heightened anxiety or arousal can become dysfunctional
- Promoting sense of efficacy in self and community
  - Restoring one's ability to manage negative emotions, solve practical problems, engage in regular or rebuilding activities
- Promoting connectedness
  - Potentially the single most important contributor to outcomes
- Instilling hope

(Hobfoll et al., 2007)

# Psychological First Aid: Elements

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

# Providing Comfort Care: **Being Calm**

- Disasters increase physical and emotional arousal, and anxiety is contagious
- Stay calm while interacting with survivors will often help them calm down
- It can be difficult not to take on others' emotions yourself, so be sure to keep breathing deeply and practice your own self-care

# Providing Comfort Care: Warmth and Genuineness

- Be attentive and fully present; try to remain focused on the conversation
- Keep your voice soft and steady
- Don't forget to breathe!

# 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 the ongoing disaster, especially if they're disoriented and can't care for themselves
- Support stability by encouraging families to maintain their routines

# Recognizing Basic Needs and Helping To Solve Problems

- Crises often create a variety of physical needs and logistical demands that can feel overwhelming to survivors
- You may be able to help people whose judgment and decision-making ability is temporarily impaired
- You may need to be directive and try to guide people towards productive choices, but still try to involve the survivor in decision-making
- If possible, frame questions in terms of choices rather than using open-ended language
- Break down the brick wall!

# Validating Survivors' Feelings and Thoughts

- Living through a traumatic event is a new and confusing experience for most people
- You may be able to help them identify or express their feelings (but don't push someone to talk about their experience if they're not ready to)
- The experience of feeling heard and understood goes a long way in helping people begin to heal
- The fact that others suffered worse losses doesn't minimize the impact of that individual's own losses

# Expressing Empathy

- Empathy vs. sympathy
- These phrases express empathy and help you make sure you understand what the survivor is trying to say:
  - “So you feel...”
  - “I hear you saying...”
  - “It sounds like...”
  - “It seems to you...”
  - “You appear...”
  - “So tell me if I am getting this right?  
You seem to be feeling that...”
- Getting the feeling wrong is ok; just apologize and ask the survivor to clarify their point



# Expressing Empathy

## *These phrases should be avoided:*

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

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

Remember...  
Some questions  
are unanswerable.

*"Don't do something – just  
stand there."*


# Validating Feelings: Dealing with Anger

- Some survivors express their distress and frustration by getting mad at a number of targets – rational or irrational:
  - Whoever they believe (accurately or not) caused the event
  - Authorities they feel didn't protect them or aren't adequately responding to their needs
  - Themselves for not following a warning
  - God for allowing the event to happen

# Validating Feelings: Dealing with Anger

- Unfortunately they may take their anger out on you, just because you're there
- Do your best not to take it personally!
- Often angry people just need to feel heard, and to blow off some steam – validating their feelings and concerns without getting angry or defensive often goes a long way help them calm down (but is easier said than done)

# Staying Empathically Engaged Requires Self-Care



- Only *genuine* empathy and warmth are helpful for clients

- Genuineness does not mean being blunt or indiscreet

- Remaining genuine with many or severely traumatized clients requires self-care

- Know your limits so you can stay genuinely empathically engaged

# Connecting People with Support Systems

- Most survivors receive far more comfort from existing support networks than from any professional intervention, so reconnecting with loved ones is a key PFA goal – even if that must be done through technology
- Social support can be:
  - Instrumental
  - Emotional
  - Informational
- Some may resist reaching out, not wanting to be a burden – ask “what would you want if the roles were reversed?”
- BUT – some friends and relatives would NOT provide positive support, so accept when resistance to reaching out is appropriate

# Providing Accurate and Timely Information

**Accurate information is an important antidote for the uncertainty and anxiety survivors experience during and after a crisis!**

- Stay aware of any up-to-date lists of available resources, treatment guidance, etc.
- 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
- Say "I don't know" when necessary, but preferably "I don't know, but...."

# 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



# Providing Education About Stress Reactions

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

# 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?"
  - What do you have control over and what do you not?
  - What can you do to manage those things you have control over?
  - What can you do to cope with those things you do not?
- 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 effective methods that help them both **feel** and **function** better

# 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

## 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 – bullying those around you

# PFA Do's and Don'ts

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

# The Bottom Line...

- Whatever your role, you can support the emotional needs of survivors, community members, and colleagues after a disaster or other stressful event using Psychological First Aid.
- A supportive presence is an important aspect of recovery and healing (you don't have to solve their problems or have the right answer).
- Caring for yourself allows you to 'refill your tank' so that you are able to continue to support others.

# Questions? Comments?



Institute for Disaster Mental Health  
at SUNY New Paltz

[www.newpaltz.edu/idmh](http://www.newpaltz.edu/idmh)

[idmh@newpaltz.edu](mailto:idmh@newpaltz.edu)

845-257-3477