

COVID-19: Principles of essential psychosocial care and Psychological First Aid.

A resource for frontline workers (including nurses, ambulance drivers, volunteers, case identifiers, teachers and other community leaders).

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UN Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group for Mental Health & Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (MHPSS) guidance

The IASC's *Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19* lists 14 key activities that should be implemented as part of the response to COVID-19; Activity 7:

“Train all frontline workers (including nurses, ambulance drivers, volunteers, case identifiers, teachers and other community leaders), including non-health workers in quarantine sites, on essential psychosocial care principles, psychological first aid and how to make referrals when needed”

This is a widely endorsed recommendation and hence we have put together these materials.

These materials contain information on:

- Principles of essential psychosocial care.
- Understanding Psychological First Aid.
- Providing Psychological First Aid.

Principals of Essential Psychosocial Care

Everyone reacts differently.

Although everyone is affected in some way by these distressing events, there are a wide range of reactions and feelings each person can have. Many people may feel overwhelmed, confused or very uncertain about what is happening. They can feel very fearful or anxious, or numb and detached. Some people may have mild reactions, whereas others may have more severe reactions.

How someone reacts depends on many factors, including:

- the nature and severity of the event(s) they experience;
- their experience with previous distressing events;
- the support they have in their life from others;
- their physical health;
- their personal and family history of mental health problems;
- their cultural background and traditions;
- their age (for example, children of different age groups react differently).

Everyone is unique.

- Every person has strengths and abilities to help them cope with life challenges.
- Some people may need extra help. This includes people who may be at risk or need additional support:
 - because of their age (children, elderly)
 - because they have a mental or physical disability
 - because they belong to groups who may be marginalized or targeted for violence

Psychosocial care aims to support factors most helpful to people's long-term recovery.

- According to various studies and the consensus of many crisis helpers, these include:
 - Feeling safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful.
 - Having access to social, physical and emotional support.
 - Feeling able to help themselves, as individuals and communities.

Helping responsibly involves four main points:

1. Respect safety, dignity and rights.
2. Adapt what you do to take account of the person's culture.
3. Be aware of other emergency response measures.
4. Look after yourself.

1. Respecting safety, dignity and rights

Do's ✓

- » Be honest and trustworthy.
- » Respect people's right to make their own decisions.
- » Be aware of and set aside your own biases and prejudices.
- » Make it clear to people that even if they refuse help now, they can still access help in the future.
- » Respect privacy and keep the person's story confidential, if this is appropriate.
- » Behave appropriately by considering the person's culture, age and gender.

DON'TS X

- » Don't exploit your relationship as a helper.
- » Don't ask the person for any money or favour for helping them.
- » Don't make false promises or give false information.
- » Don't exaggerate your skills.
- » Don't force help on people, and don't be intrusive or pushy.
- » Don't pressure people to tell you their story.
- » Don't share the person's story with others.
- » Don't judge the person for their actions or feelings.

2. Adapting what you do to take account of the person's culture

- Culture can refer to:
 - a person's background, including minority groups or others who may be marginalized.
 - the beliefs, customs, and behaviour of a particular family, social group, or organisation.
- Culture determines how we relate to people, and what it is all right and not all right to say and do, for example:
 - the farming culture has been associated with a tendency not to talk about emotions.
 - in some cultural groups it is considered appropriate for women to speak only to other women about emotions.
- You may find yourself working with people of different cultures from your own.
- As a helper, it is important to be aware of your own cultural background and beliefs so you can set aside your own biases.
- Offer help in ways that are most appropriate and comfortable to the people you are supporting.

3. Being aware of other emergency response measures

- **ACTION:** Try to find out what services and supports may be available so you can share information with people you are helping and tell them how to access practical help.
- If you act on your own, you may put yourself at risk, cause confusion in the system, and you are unlikely to be able to link people with the resources and support they need.

4. Looking after yourself

- Helping responsibly also means taking care of your own health and wellbeing.
- As a frontline worker, you may be affected by what you experience in a crisis situation, or you or your family may be directly affected by the event.
- It is important to pay extra attention to your own wellbeing and be sure that you are physically and emotionally able to help others.
- Take care of yourself so that you can best care for others.
- If working in a team, be aware of the wellbeing of your colleagues as well.

Messages for Frontline Workers...

- Feeling stressed is an experience that you and many of your colleagues are likely going through; in fact, it is quite normal to be feeling this way in the current situation.
- Workers may feel that they are not doing a good enough job and are not fully equipped to deal with the extra demands of the situation.
- Stress and the feelings associated with it are not a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak. In fact, stress can be useful. Right now, the feeling of stress may be keeping you going and providing a sense of purpose, but *managing* your stress and psychosocial wellbeing helpfully at this time is as important as keeping physically healthy.

...Messages for Frontline Workers...

- Take care of your basic needs; ensure rest and respite during work or between shifts, eat enough and try to make healthy food choices, take some exercise, and stay in contact with family and friends. Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies such as tobacco, excessive alcohol or other drugs. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical wellbeing .
- workers may unfortunately feel shut out by their family or community due to stigma and fear. This can make a challenging situation more difficult. Staying connected with your loved ones through digital methods is one way to maintain contact. Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted persons for social support- your colleagues may be having similar experiences to you.
- This is likely a unique and unprecedented scenario for most workers in Cornwall. Even so, the strategies that you have used in the past to manage times of stress may benefit you now, even if the scenario is different.

Messages for Frontline Workers.

- If your stress worsens and you feel overwhelmed, you are not to blame. Everyone experiences stress and copes with it differently. Ongoing and old pressures from your personal life can affect your mental wellbeing in your day to day job. You may notice changes in how you are working, your mood may change such as increased irritability, feeling low or more anxious, you may feel chronically exhausted or it may feel harder to relax during respite periods, or you may have unexplained physical complaints such as body pain or stomach aches.
- Chronic stress can affect your mental wellbeing and your work and can affect you even after the situation improves. If the stress becomes overwhelming, please approach your lead or the appropriate person to ensure you are provided with appropriate support.



Rest and reflection

Taking time for rest and reflection is an important part of ending your helping role. The distressing situation and needs of people you have met may have been very challenging, and it can be difficult to bear their pain and suffering. After helping in a crisis situation, take time to reflect on the experience for yourself and to rest.

The following suggestions may be helpful to your own recovery:

- Talk about your experience of helping in the crisis situation with a supervisor, colleague or someone else 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.

Understanding Psychological First Aid

What is Psychological First Aid?

- Psychological First Aid (PFA) involves humane, supportive and practical help to fellow human beings suffering serious crisis events.
- It is an approach designed to be used by people in a position to help others who have experienced an extremely distressing event.
- It gives a framework for supporting people in ways that respect their dignity, culture and abilities.
- Despite its name, Psychological First Aid covers both social and psychological support.
- Psychological First Aid training helps you to know the most supportive things to say and do for people who are very distressed.



An evidence informed approach

- In 2009, the World Health Organization's (WHO) mhGAP Guidelines Development Group evaluated the evidence for psychological first aid and psychological debriefing. They concluded that psychological first aid, rather than psychological debriefing, should be offered to people in severe distress after being recently exposed to a traumatic event.
- The WHO's work on Psychological First Aid, is endorsed by many international agencies, and reflects the emerging science and international consensus on how to support people in the immediate aftermath of extremely stressful events.

PFA involves the following themes:

- Providing practical care and support, which does not intrude.
- Assessing needs and concerns.
- Helping people to address basic needs (for example, food and water, information).
- Listening to people, but not pressuring them to talk.
- Comforting people and helping them to feel calm.
- Helping people connect to information, services and social supports.
- Protecting people from further harm.

PFA is Not

- It is not something that only professionals can do.
- It is not professional counselling.
- It is not “psychological debriefing” in that PFA does not necessarily involve a detailed discussion of the event/s that caused the distress.
- It is not asking someone to analyse what happened to them or to put time and events in order.
- Although PFA involves being available to listen to people’s stories, it is not about pressuring people to tell you their feelings and reactions to an event.

Who is PFA for?

- Not everyone who experiences a crisis event will need or want PFA. Do not force help on people who do not want it, but make yourself easily available to those who may want support.
- There may be situations when someone needs much more support than PFA alone.
- Know your limits and get help from others, such as appropriate health care and social care professionals, your colleagues, local authorities, or community and religious leaders.
- People who need more immediate advanced support include:
 - people with health problems who need immediate medical care
 - people who are so upset that they cannot care for themselves or their children/dependants
 - people who may hurt themselves
 - people who may hurt others



When is PFA provided?

- Although people may need access to help and support for a long time after an event, PFA is aimed at helping people who have been very recently affected by a distressing event.
- You can provide PFA when you first have contact with very distressed people.
- This is usually during or immediately after an event but it may sometimes be days or weeks after, depending on how long the event lasted and how severe it was.

Where is PFA provided?

- You can offer PFA wherever it is safe enough for you to do so.
- This is may be in community settings (subject to COVID restrictions), or over the phone or digitally.
- Try to provide PFA where they and you can have some privacy to talk with the person to respect their dignity and confidentiality; they may have sensitive thoughts and feelings that they need to feel safe to share.





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Providing Psychological First Aid

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Prepare: Learn about COVID-19

You may feel that urgent action is needed at times. However, before you talk with people, try to get accurate information about the situation. The urgency is to act wisely.

- Learn about the COVID-19 outbreak; you don't have to be an expert but make sure you are aware of the key guidance being given to the general public by the government and the organisation you work for – **this is changing rapidly so it is important to make sure you are up to date.**
- Learn about available services and supports available to people in your local area or at least know who to ask.
- Learn about safety and security concerns e.g. learn about infection control and find out if there any untrustworthy services taking advantage of the vulnerable.

Principles of PFA: Look, Listen and Link

- **Look:** intervene safely, be mindful of risk of infection.
- **Listen:** Ask about their needs and concerns. What is most important to them at this moment? Give them your undivided attention, use active listening skills if you have them, listen with compassion and respect. help them feel calm.
- **Link:** Support people to address their basic needs and access services. This may mean signposting. Support people to cope with their problems, give information. Connect people with loved ones and social support.

Help people to help themselves and to regain control of their situation.

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Good Communication: Things to say and do



- Try to find a quiet place to talk, and minimize outside distractions, or ask if the person can find such a place to talk if you are having a telephone/video conversation.
- Respect privacy and keep the person's story confidential, if this is appropriate (you will need to share what is said if it raises concerns that there is a risk to someone)
- Stay near the person but keep an appropriate distance depending on their age, gender and culture.
- Let them know you are listening; for example, nod your head or say "hmmmm...."
- Be patient and calm.
- 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."
- Give information in a way the person can understand – keep it simple.
- 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."
- Acknowledge the person's strengths and how they have helped themselves.
- Allow for silence, don't feel you need to fill it.

Good Communication: Things NOT to say and do

DON'TS X

- Don't pressure someone to tell their story.
- Don't interrupt or rush someone's story (for example, don't look at your watch or speak too rapidly).
- Don't touch the person if you're not sure it is appropriate to do so.
- 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".
- Don't make up things you don't know.
- Don't use terms that are too technical.
- Don't tell them someone else's story.
- Don't talk about your own troubles.
- Don't give false promises or false reassurances.
- Don't think and act as if you must solve all the person's problems for them.
- Don't take away the person's strength and sense of being able to care for themselves.
- Don't talk about people in negative terms (for example, don't call them "crazy" or "mad").

Helping people to feel calm

Some people may be very anxious or upset. They may feel confused or overwhelmed, and may have some physical reactions such as shaking or trembling, difficulty breathing or feeling their heart pounding. The following techniques may help:

- Keep your tone of voice calm and soft.
- Try to maintain some eye contact with the person as you talk with them if they are comfortable with this.
- Remind the person that you are there to help them. Remind them that they are safe, if it is true.
- If someone feels unreal or disconnected from their surroundings, it may help them to make contact with their current environment and themselves. You can do this by asking them to:
 - Place and feel their feet on the floor.
 - Tap their fingers or hands on their lap.
 - Notice some non-distressing things in their environment, such as things they can see, hear or feel. Have them tell you what they see and hear.
 - Encourage the person to focus on their breathing, and to breathe slowly.

Helping people to cope with problems

A person in distress can feel overwhelmed with worries and fears. Help them to consider their most urgent needs, and how to prioritize and address them. For example, you can ask them to think about what they need to address now, and what can wait for later. 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.

Remember to:

- Help people identify supports in their life, such as friends or family, who can help them in the current situation
- Give practical suggestions for people to meet their own needs (for example, explain how the person can register to receive food aid or material assistance)
- Ask the person to consider how they coped with difficult situations in the past, and affirm their ability to cope with the current situation
- Ask the person what helps them to feel better. Encourage them to use positive coping strategies and avoid negative coping strategies.

Encourage positive coping strategies

- Get enough rest.
- Eat as regularly as possible and drink water.
- Talk and spend time with family and friends (this may mean using telephone or electronic communication)
- Discuss problems with someone you trust.
- Do activities that help you relax (e.g. walk, sing, meditate, pray).
- Do physical exercise.
- Find safe ways to help others in the crisis and get involved in community activities.

Discourage negative coping strategies

- Don't take drugs, smoke or drink excessive alcohol.
- Don't sleep all day.
- Don't work all the time without any rest or relaxation.
- Don't withdraw from friends and loved ones.
- Don't neglect basic personal hygiene.
- Don't be violent or verbally aggressive.

Ending your intervention.

- When and how you stop providing help will depend on the context of the distressing event, your role and situation, and the needs of the people you are helping.
- Use your best judgment of the situation, the person's needs and your own needs.
- If appropriate, explain to the person that you are leaving, and if someone else will be helping them from that point on, try and introduce them to that person.
- If you have linked the person with other services, let them know what to expect and be sure they have the details to follow up.
- If you are leaving them alone, agree a plan for how they are going to spend the rest of their day to benefit their wellbeing.
- **No matter what your experience has been with the person, you can say goodbye in a positive way by wishing them well.**

The importance of time.

- Most people will recover well over time, especially if they can restore their basic needs and receive support such as help from those around them and/or PFA.
- People with either severe or long-lasting distress reactions may need more support than PFA alone, particularly if they cannot function in their daily life or if they are a danger to themselves or others.
- 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.

Review - we have been looking at information on:

- Principles of essential psychosocial care.
 - Everyone reacts differently.
 - Psychosocial care aims to support factors most helpful to people's long-term recovery.
 - The 4 main aspects of helping responsibly:
 1. Respect safety, dignity and rights.
 2. Adapt what you do to take account of the person's culture.
 3. Be aware of other emergency response measures.
 4. Look after yourself.
- Understanding Psychological First Aid.
 - A humane and practical approach to fellow human beings suffering serious distressing events, helping you to know the most supportive things to say and do for people who are very distressed.
- Providing Psychological First Aid.
 - Being prepared and using the principals of Look, Listen and Link.

These materials have been taken directly from key international guidance with minor adaptations to ensure they are relevant to the current COVID-19 outbreak in Cornwall and the IoS.

References:

- UN Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group for Mental Health & Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (MHPSS) *Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 Version 1.1*: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/briefing-note-about>
- World Health Organisation, *Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers*: https://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/

**WE HOPE YOU FOUND THESE
MATERIALS USEFUL.**