



Stress First Aid Group Engagement Strategies





Stress First Aid Model

This guide was designed to increase engagement with groups when offering Stress First Aid or Stress First Aid trainings. It was developed by Patricia Watson of the National Center for PTSD, and Richard Westphal of the University of Virginia.

For additional information on Stress First Aid, you may also review the Stress First Aid for Health Care Workers Manual, by Patricia Watson, Ph.D., of the National Center for PTSD, and Richard Westphal of the University of Virginia.





Stress First Aid

Group Engagement Strategies

Stress First Aid (SFA) is a self-care and coworker support model developed for those in high-stress occupations. It offers simple, practical actions to identify and address early stress reactions in oneself and others in both an acute and ongoing way (not just after “critical incidents”). It allows for differences in capacity for self-care or coworker support, as well as preferences as to what is most helpful. SFA gives a framework to identify the actions which might be most indicated in different circumstances. It also highlights the importance of organizations engaging in discussions and problem-solving around work stress.

This guide offers potential icebreakers and group engagement strategies that can be chosen from when delivering SFA or SFA trainings in your organization or department. None of these strategies are mandatory. They are offered as possible options only. You may choose other strategies that match your needs more closely. These strategies were originally compiled for in-person groups / trainings, but many could be adapted for virtual groups / trainings. Strategies specific to virtual groups are included in item 22 at the end of the document.

The SFA manual, workbook, and additional training resources can be found on the [NCPTSD website](#).





Group Engagement Strategies

Trainings:

1. **Introductions.** For trainings, have each person introduce themselves, where they work and what they do, so you can tailor examples throughout the training, and they can network.
2. **Personalize SFA Trainings.** Personalize the training to engage the audience. Talk about the why this training is needed in this group, based on local statistics, or ways that you have used the intervention yourself (and even your own misgivings and solutions to obstacles). Trainees are more likely to be engaged when they see the need for the training, and that what you are teaching is important to you personally. Help people describe and discuss their own experiences.
3. **Expectations.** Ask people what they expect to get out of the training. While they are speaking, list the group's expectations and identify which components will be addressed and which won't. Also connect them to where they can find other resources related to expectations that won't be covered in the training.
4. **Role Play:** Either have pairs role play SFA interventions and report back how it felt for them to play each role, or have the trainers role play interventions for the group with everyone watching, and then ask them what they would do differently, what questions they have, etc.

Trainings or Group Meetings

1. **Objects.** Bring in six objects per small group, and have the group discuss ways that their object relates to their current context, then share with the group. Objects can include anything: bottled water, flashlight, food item, first aid kit, toy, blanket, plant, etc.
2. **Challenges/Rewards.** Have each person share his or her biggest challenges and biggest rewards from the previous week/month/year. Some groups do this several times a year.
3. **Most Unique.** Go around the room and have each person share something that makes them different from anyone in the group, like, "I've never left the state I was born in" or "I am one of ten kids."



4. **Two Truths and a Non-Truth.** With groups that know each other, have each person make three fun/light biographical statements about themselves: two true statements and one lie. For example, “I’ve never ___, I have five siblings. I was born in ____.” The group tries to guess which statement is the non-truth.

5. **Personal Scavenger Hunt.** Take five minutes and tell each person to find and share items in their wallet, briefcase, or purse, such as something that . . .
 - They’ve had a long time.
 - They’re proud of.
 - Reveals a lot about them.
 - Reminds them of a fun time.
 - Concerns or worries them.

6. **Get To Know You Questions:**
 - What do you do for fun?
 - What would be your ideal vacation?
 - What is your superpower, or the superpower you would *like* to have?
 - What is the most memorable activity you did with your family as a child?
 - What quality do you appreciate most in a friend?
 - What is one characteristic you received from you parents that you want to keep, and one you wish you could change?
 - What is a good thing happening in your life right now, and what makes it good?
 - If you knew you couldn’t fail and money was no object, what would you like to do in the next five years?
 - What would you like others to say about you when you are not in the room?
 - On your phone, what’s your most used emoji?
 - What’s the strangest food you’ve eaten?
 - Who was your childhood famous crush?
 - What would be one or more of your soundtrack songs?
 - What celebrity do most people say you look like?
 - If you could try any food, what would it be?
 - What movie do you wish you could watch again for the first time?
 - You can only eat one food again for the rest of your life. What is it?
 - What’s your go-to karaoke anthem?
 - What’s your favorite type of sandwich?
 - When did you most question or wonder about life/spirituality/the meaning of why we’re here, and how did it happen?

7. **Colors Game.** Pass around colored marbles, plastic disks, or candies like M&M’s and tell everyone to take a few. Then, ask them to share something for every item. For example, something about their family for every red one, something about their plans for the future for every green one, etc.



8. **You Write the Question.** Give each person a 3 X 5 card. You pick the topic and let them write the questions. For example, you choose “friendship” as a topic, and they each write out a question for anyone in the group to answer about friendship. For example, “What do you value most in a friend?” or, “Who was your best friend growing up and why?” Then pile all the cards face down in the middle of the group and let people draw. Topic ideas: jobs, life goals, funny stories, hobbies, family, fears, dating issues, significant relationships, relationship with God, etc.
9. **My Life in Pictures.** Bring a newspaper or magazine. Have people tear out a picture, article or anything they think tells something about themselves. If there’s enough time they can make a collage that tells more about themselves.
10. **Make Believe.** Ask each person to share with the group some make believe wish, such as:
 - If you could go anywhere in the world now, where would you go and why?
 - If you could talk to anyone in the world, who would it be and why?
 - If you could talk to any person who has died, who would you talk to and why?
 - If you could wish one thing to come true about your upcoming summer, what would it be and why?
11. **Deserted Island.** Ask, “You’ve been exiled to a deserted island for a year. You are told you may take three things you want, apart from the essentials. What would you take and why?”
12. **Heroes.** Ask each person to name three people, past or present, they admire, and tell why. Or ask them if they could interview anyone in history, who would that be and why, and what one or two questions would they want to ask?
13. **Find your Match.** Cut up a photo of the characters from an old television show so one character is on each photo (i.e., Brady Bunch, Adams Family, Partridge Family, Gilligan’s Island). Have each person find the people who are associated with their picture. That’s their new group that can then engage in other activities on this list or related to a training exercise. They have to interact with almost everyone in the room to find their spot.
14. **Problem-Solving.** Share a challenging work scenario and give 10 minutes for the group to brainstorm solutions. Be clear that you might not be able to “solve” the problem but as a group could come up with creative ways to “mitigate” the problem or stress associated with the problem.
15. **Walk.** Take a walk together to get a break, change the scenery (whether indoors or outdoors) and get the body moving. Keep it simple or incorporate activities into the walk.



16. **Calming exercises.**

- Walk people through a guided breathing, mindfulness, and/or visualization exercise.
- Allow people to discuss what is most calming for them, and guide others through it if it is possible to do with the group.
- Have people make paper airplanes and write on each folded part a thing they want to “let go of” and then when they are done, they throw those things away with the airplane.

17. **Sociometry.** Tell the group that sociometry is a creative way to engage the group to explore the relationships and systems they live in. Pick a few options below and instruct people to move around the room to:

a. Find someone who:

- Had the same breakfast as you
- Has the same shoe size (or has the same size hand)
- Has a different religious belief
- You haven't met yet, but would really like to
- Has the same favorite season
- Has the same favorite sense

b. Arrange each other according to:

- The place where you were born
- The place where you live
- A place you would like to visit
- A place where a memorable event took place for you

c. Lineup according to:

- Number of siblings
- Thumb size
- Number of glasses of water (or cups of caffeine) you drink per day
- Introversion / extraversion
- How tired / alert you feel
- Number of different countries you've visited

d. Identify the person you've known the longest and put your hand on their shoulder. Then take a look around and see the clusters of groups. Interview and see how long they've known each other. Show who is in the center of communities and identify each person in the room. The well-connected person may be someone who is a good source of networking.



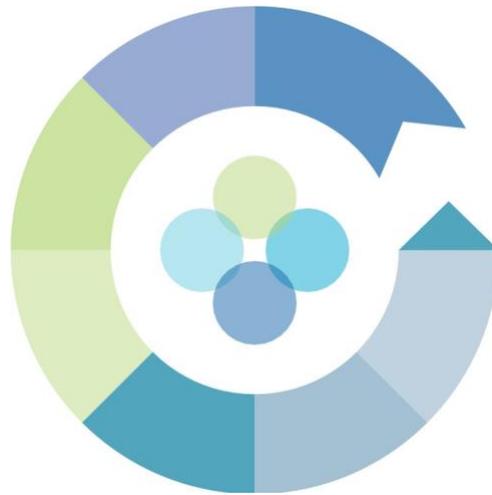
18. **Universal Sentiment.** Have people write down the name of someone/something near and dear to their heart, or something they really enjoy in life. Then ask them to imagine what they feel like or would feel like when/if they are/were disconnected from that person/thing/activity, to speak with each other with a sense of empathy for others in the group and for those they are working with.
19. **Center of the Universe Energizer.** Make the center of the universe the place where the training/group is taking place. Set up a compass, and have people position selves around room based on where they were born. Identify where people have come from, and who has come from the farthest away.
20. **Brain Gym Energizer.** At breaks, everyone gets a drink of water and does brain gym hands exercises https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWvS1_IES9Y
21. **Trying New Things.** Have people fold their arms as they usually do, then ask them to put their arms folded with the opposite arm in front. It is an illustration of how we do things in one way most of the time, and when they need to do it differently, it can feel strange. Have a discussion about other changes that have felt this way for them lately.

Some items from this list adapted from “The Ultimate Road Trip: a Guide to Leading Small Groups” by Rick James.



22. Virtual Strategies to Engage People from a Distance:

- a. Set up a virtual meeting that includes whichever strategies you feel you could accomplish from items 1-21 on this list.
- b. Pick a secret support person and send notes or cards via regular mail.
- c. Hold a monthly lunch-and-learn with online videos of topics which interest staff.
- d. Complete a virtual scavenger hunt or game (Hangman, Trivial Pursuit, Battleship, etc.).
- e. Teach each other new hobbies or skills during virtual meetings or through short videos shared via message boards or video links.
- f. Use apps or virtual meetings to share favorite pictures with each other (family, pets, vacations, your favorite photographer's work, etc.).
- g. Have a virtual lunch date.
- h. Create shared play lists of favorite songs or funny videos.
- i. Organize a team effort and create something that virtually helps those in need.
- j. Start a virtual "favorites club" with books / YouTube channels / shows / movies / etc. Plan regular meetings to discuss.
- k. Start a monthly virtual talent show or cooking competition, where the most appealing video / photo / recipe wins.
- l. Embark on a virtual field trip together. Volunteers can pick a museum or destination to share virtually, and each person can explore and pick a time to reconnect afterwards to talk about your favorite parts.
- m. Start a virtual chain project where the team writes a story or screenplay together, adding a new sentence each go-around in a group email or board.
- n. Take turns sharing or reading your favorite quotes or poems aloud to each other.
- o. Use group emails, mobile platforms, or apps to create a virtual "water cooler/ social hour" where coworkers can 'drop by' when they need a short break. Ask coworkers how their days are going, offer your own updates or fun facts, or ask a question everyone can answer



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for SFA TRAINERS

