
Using Stress First Aid to Support Others in Disasters or Public Health Crises



National Center for PTSD

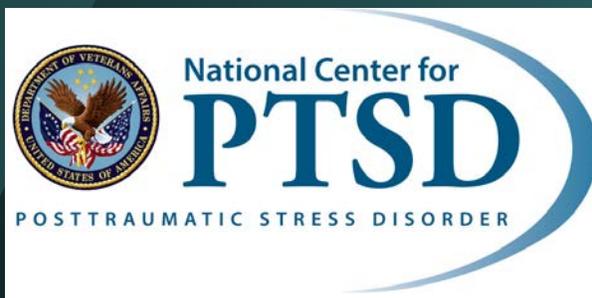


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introduction

What is the Need?

Support from others can be crucial in fostering the ability to cope and endure.

Wellbeing and emotional resilience are likely to be severely tested during disasters or public health crises. Stress can come from many sources, both personally and collectively. These can include trauma, loss, fatigue and wear and tear injury, and moral distress or injury (when you wish you could have done something differently or feel angry or betrayed by how others are doing things).



Stress First Aid

How to Help



Five Elements foster recovery in ongoing, adverse situations.

The Stress First Aid model provides a flexible framework of supportive actions, based on five elements that have been linked to better recovery from disasters and other adverse situations.

These elements are:

- Increased sense of safety (**Cover**)
- **Calming**
- Social connectedness (**Connect**)
- Self-efficacy, or the feeling that one has the skills or resources to endure (**Competence**)
- Hope, which can include confidence, optimism, faith, or meaning (**Confidence**)

The SFA model includes **Checking** in regularly and **Coordinating** with other people or resources as further actions that facilitate support to those experiencing stressful situations.

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How to Help Yourself



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How to Help Others



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Components of Each SFA Action

Approach

Make sure you show:

- Respect for the person's strengths and unique experiences
- That you care for and want to help the other person
- That you want to understand the other person's experiences

Information

Make sure you:

- Are curious about the person's unique experiences
- Do not jump to conclusions
- Don't assume that just because the person has certain experiences that they are affected in a particular way
- Give information in a calming way

Direction

Try to:

- Give suggestions based on an understanding of your own and others' helpful coping strategies,
- Tailor your suggestions person's unique experiences, preferences and reactions
- Discover potentially helpful resources and supports that you can pass on
- Incorporate empathy and sensitivity into your suggestions

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Helpful Knowledge to Have

Knowledge

- Unique and up-to-date parameters of the disaster
- Local considerations
- Needs of vulnerable populations
- Referral options and available resources



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Helpful Skills and Abilities

Skills

- Communication skills (conveying empathy, warmth, assertiveness)
- Rapid assessment and summarization of concerns
- Problem-solving
- Action planning
- Cultural competence
- Providing support that is tailored to timing, context, and culture
- Self-care and coworker support

Abilities

- Communication Flexibility
- Empathy (staying with the person's experience rather than trying to make them feel better)
- Knowing when to be directive and when to be silent
- Tolerance of strong distress
- Tolerance of uncertainty
- Maintenance of optimism and hopefulness
- Remaining focused on the needs and priorities of affected individuals
- Able to take stock of one's own strengths, limitations, and assumptions
- Able to maintain boundaries and self-care skills

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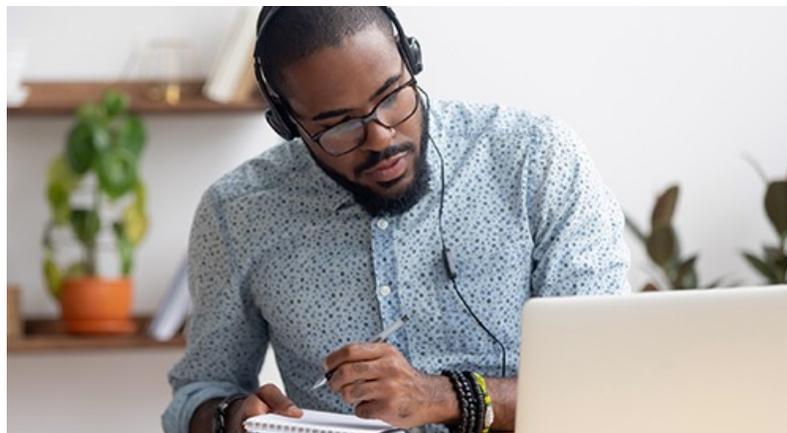
Tips and Goals

Tips

- Keep the conversation on course.
- Redirect the person towards the current problem rather than past problems.
- For those with mental health backgrounds, refrain from providing therapy and/or offering interpretative remarks.

Goals

- Help the person feel heard, supported and understood.
- Normalize the person's reactions so they don't feel that their reactions mean that something is wrong with them.
- Empower the person to identify problems, prioritize, make decisions about what to do, and take appropriate action.



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Tips for How to Help

DON'T:

- **Make assumptions** about their needs or priorities
- **Pressure them into sharing details of their story**
- Make **false promises** or reassurances, use jargon
- **Rush** the person or talk about **your own troubles**
- **Assume their worldview or way of coping is the same as yours**
- **Judge** their reactions, focus only on problems
- Think or act as if you need to **solve all of their problems**
- Try to take their pain away or **cheer them up**

DO:

- Collaboratively **assess needs and priorities**
- Meet them **where they are**
- Share concrete, simple, **practical information**
- Communicate **calm, compassion, and respect**
- **Acknowledge strengths**
- Be aware of the **limitations** of your role
- Accept and **acknowledge** difficult emotions
- **Take the person's culture** into account

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Tips for Providing Emotional Support

If you want more information, try saying something like: “It sounds like you’ve experienced some really hard things – can you help me understand how they are affecting you now?”

If the person speaks of guilt, you can say something like: “It sounds like you’re really burdened by things you did or didn’t do” to facilitate further discussion.

If you don’t know how to respond, say something like: “That must have been incredibly hard. I can’t imagine how I would feel in that situation.”

If you can’t tolerate having a conversation about the person’s experiences because of your own stress, be honest. Say something like: “I don’t know if I can hear this story now, but I would like to help in other ways, and I can also try to find someone that you can talk with about your experiences.”

Stress First Aid Core Actions

Check

Checking in involves tracking stress reactions and asking what would be supportive

If you don't know the person, introduce yourself and why you are approaching them.

Build rapport (if needed) and communicate **calm, respect, and compassion**.

If needed, move or suggest the person moves to a **private** setting

Aim to collaboratively **discuss needs and priorities** without making assumptions.

Look particularly for common signs of significant stress, including:

- Loss of control of emotions
- No longer feeling like oneself
- Decreases in ability to function at work or home
- Changes in relationships
- Increased drinking / use of substances.

“When someone is really tired, they sometimes can't find words to express what they are feeling, so I will give specific options, like, “are you feeling tense / numb / worried?” I also watch for body language. I may also suggest changing something about what is happening at that moment, to get them some distraction or relief.”

Stress First Aid Tool

Check: Using the Stress Continuum

The stress continuum shows that stress responses lie along a spectrum of severity. Awareness of the different zones can help you talk about what zone a person feels they are currently in, which can help you begin to identify ways to help provide support.

Ready	Reacting	Injured	Ill
<p>Circumstances: Prepared Supported</p>	<p>Circumstances: Responding to multiple stressors at work or home Double-edged sword vulnerabilities</p>	<p>Circumstances: Strong or multiple stressors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma • Loss • Moral injury • Wear and tear 	<p>Circumstances: Unhealed orange zone stress Additional stress Risk factors</p>
<p>Optimal functioning: At one's best In control Motivated</p>	<p>Mild and transient distress or impairment: Changes in mood Loss of motivation Loss of focus Physical changes</p>	<p>More severe or persistent distress or impairment: Loss of control No longer feeling like normal self</p>	<p>Clinical mental disorder: Symptoms persist and worsen Severe distress Functional impairment</p>

section 03

Nash, W. P. (2011). US Marine Corps and Navy combat and operational stress continuum model: A tool for leaders. *Combat and operational behavioral health*, 107-119.

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Cover

To provide *Cover* means to ensure or improve ongoing sense of safety

In extended disasters or public health crises, ask regularly about safety by asking questions about how the situation has affected the person's sense of safety, and what ways they prefer for regaining a sense of safety. Then brainstorm and make plans to reduce their concerns in any way possible.

Do your best to be well-informed about information that can help you and them stay safe. Keep track of resources that might be helpful. Read or talk with others who have been through similar situations about their safety strategies.

Stress reactions can contribute to hyper-sensitivity, reduction in problem-solving abilities, and trouble self-regulating emotions, which can make a person feel unsafe in relationships.

You can balance those types of stress reactions by reducing your own reactivity and remaining calm. Know how not to overreact and what to do to be supportive, especially if the person feels out of control in some way.

Give consistent support messages, such as “we will get through this together”.

“I learned ways to reduce the person's concerns so she could prevent increasing anxiety. We also talked about potential things that might happen, and how they would cover their needs. If they felt that their safety was compromised, I sat with them and did my best to be an empathic and calming presence. Trying to tell them they shouldn't worry can make it worse. Sometimes you just have to close your mouth and let there be silence.”

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Calm

The goal of Calm is to either calm them or support them to calm themselves.

To determine if the person needs *Calming* beyond Cover actions, you can ask questions like:

- Have you had any changes in ability to sleep, in feelings of being on edge, or in ability to keep calm?
- What usually helps you to calm down?
- What would help you to feel more of a sense of calm?
- This is such a stressful situation, what do you think might help to calm you down?

Try to help them be disciplined about keeping calming activities in their schedule, even if it means switching to ones that take less time

You can also:

- Give them opportunities to talk or vent about what concerns them.
- Give them suggestions for calming themselves down (e.g., problem-solving, exercise, drawing a bath, giving them a massage, or supporting them in breathing, meditation, or guided imagery exercises).
- Help them with their self-talk if it is increasing their anxiety or agitation. For instance, talk with them about the fact that they and everyone around them are not at their best at times like this.
- Remind them to try to be more tolerant and forgiving of themselves and others, to find more peace.

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Connect

Connect involves increasing support when a person is stressed.

One way to open a conversation is to ask questions like:

- How are you feeling about connecting with me/us?
- Is there someone you feel most comfortable talking with about stressful experiences?
- What is the best way I can support you during this time?
- Has anyone you know done or said something that really helped?

Remember there are different ways to provide social support, including practical assistance, advice or guidance, and emotional support.

Help with practical matters can be things like helping them to maintain routines, complete tasks outside of work, or helping them to have a healthy diet to boost their energy and immune system.

If the person wants emotional support, be a good listener. What we do and say is often not as important as what the other person says. Often what the person wants is to know that someone cares enough to check on them and to listen to what they are grappling with.

Even a short conversation can be helpful in conveying that the person is not alone and that someone cares about them. Be nonjudgmental and understanding if the person chooses to share their feelings with you.

“Sometimes they may not want me to offer suggestions, they may just need to vent. I’ve learned to ask her if they wants this to be a venting conversation or a problem-solving conversation.”

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Connect

In some instances, your role may be to help the person connect with others.

Encourage the person to socialize with family, friends, neighbors, mentors or coworkers who understand what they are experiencing.

If the person has a family, suggest family rituals that promote connection, such as games, talk time, sharing things that inspire or that family members are grateful for, things that bring meaning or cause one to reflect about life. They can also make recordings, photos, art or a book to honor how you are all getting through the situation.

“He used to be an avid golfer, but he hasn’t been able to do that lately and it’s made him depressed. I reminded him that just because he can’t play a full round of golf doesn’t mean that he and I can’t do similar things like hitting some balls into a net.”

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Competence

Helping with Competence means fostering or restoring someone's capacity to endure through life's challenges and adversities.

Open a conversation about this by asking questions such as:

- Do you have any concerns about being able to handle what's going on?
- What are some things that you have done to cope that have been helpful?
- What do you think would help you feel like you can get through this?

You can support strategies that help them feel more in control, with a focus on tiny steps, or one step at a time.

Encourage them to keep on doing what they need to do, to not look too far ahead, and to pace themselves.

Support them to cope with their stress in healthy ways.

Help them find even small things they can do to get through each day.

Encourage them to do whatever they can to help keep themselves strong and healthy.

Stress First Aid

Competence

Fostering Competence can mean helping the person prioritize and problem solve strategies or solutions.

If the person is **overwhelmed** by many different issues:

- Help them prioritize needs and concerns, select an issue to focus on, develop an action plan
- Provide basic **information about common stress reactions** (e.g., intrusive thoughts, avoidance, bodily symptoms, strong negative emotions)
- Work together to identify the person's **existing helpful coping strategies** and provide information about potential **new coping strategies**
- Collaboratively **assess** and **prioritize** needs and concerns
- Choose the **most pressing controllable issue** to address
- **Brainstorm possible solutions** to the problem
- Consider **pros and cons** and **choose a solution**
- Make an **action plan** for carrying out the solution



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Confidence

Helping with Confidence means restoring hope, self-esteem, faith, or optimism.

Helping with **Confidence** involves building self-esteem or hope that may have been damaged or lost as a result of stressful experiences, promoting confidence in core values and beliefs, bolstering pride and commitment, or helping the person find meaning, increase optimism, or reflect upon religious beliefs or spirituality.

You can start a conversation by asking about how the current circumstances have affected their sense of hope, confidence, optimism, or faith. Ask if they have had changes in their self-worth or ability to deal with their life tasks or role, or if they've lost confidence in others.

Ask if the current situation holds special meaning or connects with other experiences in any way.

Finally, ask what could help them with these things.

"I try to build their confidence up. When they express guilt, "I could've done this or that," I try to remind them that they did the best they could at the time, or I ask if they would want a loved one to feel the same way in similar circumstances. I try to be as calm, non-judgmental, and supportive as possible. I do a lot of redirecting from past-focus to present-focus and what they can do right now, today. There is not a lot a person can do if they're bogged down by memories or worried about the future."

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Confidence

It is often only in conversations with empathic friends and family that one can restore hope and confidence.

Try to find the most conducive ways for the person to talk. If they are stuck in unhelpful thoughts or beliefs, try to help them gain a more helpful perspective on how they are viewing themselves or others. Reminding them that they're part of something bigger may help. Assist them to focus on what is going well, what they're grateful for, how they're getting stronger, or how they can be inspired by those around them.

Help them see what meaning their experiences hold for them or highlight their strengths and core values.

If losses happen, find ways to make meaning and honor the loss. Help them express their feelings and help them to honor or make sense of the loss in whatever way is possible. If relevant, support any ways that church / religion / faith / prayer could help them.

"I break things down into small steps so they can see their incremental accomplishments and not get overwhelmed. We look at it and talk about it. I remind them that they can accomplish things by taking small steps, and that it's okay to have feelings, but not to let the feelings stop or control them for long. Most of the time that works."

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Coordinate

*While the preceding SFA actions may be all that is needed to support someone during adverse events, **Coordinate** reminds you to collaborate with others if you need additional assistance.*

There are many possible options for coordinating with others:

- Find resources that might be helpful if you have concerns and feel you are not able to provide the person enough support.
- Find creative ways to get them support, such as helping the person to reach out to an old friend, family member, supportive mentor or coworker, or a professional.
- Consider different avenues of professional support, such as online or telehealth, if flexibility is needed. It may help to interview professionals to get a sense of how they can help.

Watson, P., Gist, R., Taylor, V. Evlander, E., Leto, F., Martin, R., Vaught, D., Nash, W.P., Westphal, R., & Litz, B. (2013). Stress First Aid for Firefighters and Emergency Services Personnel. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Stress First Aid

Advanced Planning Actions

If appropriate, you can also incorporate the following advanced actions into your response:

1. Identify and summarize target problems and reactions.
 - ‘It sounds as if XX and now you are experiencing XX.’
 - ‘Let me make sure I have this correct. You say you’ve experienced XX and are feeling XX.’
 - ‘It’s understandable that you would feel this way, given what you’ve experienced.’
2. Ask about their top priorities and/or what needs attention first.
3. Involve the person in developing an action plan that focuses on what they can control:
 - Ask about and reinforce prior coping skills/behaviors/thoughts.
 - Ask about future behaviors/thoughts:
 - ‘Which behaviors/thoughts are likely to make the problem worse?’
 - ‘Which behaviors/thoughts are likely to help the problem?’
 - ‘What do you think will best help with current problems?’
 - Changes in the environment
 - Changes in behavior or thoughts
4. Ask the person if they think they can try out the action plan.
 - ‘It sounds as if X might help you to Y. Do you think you can do this?’
 - ‘Are there any potential barriers to following through with the plan?’
 - ‘What could get in the way of following through on this plan?’
 - ‘Are there any holes in this plan?’
5. If barriers or problems are identified, develop a revised plan and then have the person re-commit to this new plan.

thank
you

Contact information

For more info on SFA: please visit:

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/stress_first_aid.asp