PFA
PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID
STRONGER TOGETHER

A GUIDE TO HELP YOU & YOUR COMMUNITY

PAHO
Caribbean Development Bank
The Pan American Health Organization and the Caribbean Development Bank have developed this booklet as a tool to help you take care of yourself and your community during crisis situations. This is achieved through psychological first aid, also known as PFA, a humane, supportive and practical response to a fellow human being who is suffering and may need support.

In this booklet, our “PFA helper” will guide you through the three basic principles of PFA: look, listen and link. This will help you to approach affected people, listen and understand their needs, and link them with practical support and information. It will also bring to your attention the needs of specific groups, including men, women, children and adolescents, and people with disabilities, among others.

Enjoy the booklet, read it again from time to time, share it with friends, family and members of your community, and spread the message:

“Stronger Together”.
A DISASTER

STRUCK

YOUR COMMUNITY

This guide will help you to know the most supportive things to say and do for distressed people.
YOUR SAFETY FIRST!

Crisis situations change rapidly:
- Weather conditions
- Flooding
- Building that may collapse...

Take time to “look” around you before offering help.

PFA should be provided by adults.

be calm  be safe  think before you act
OBVIOUS URGENT BASIC NEEDS

LIFE THREATENING CONDITIONS?

Need rescuing, such as people trapped or in immediate danger?
Critically injured and in need of emergency, medical help?

BASIC NEEDS?

Shelter, food, water?
Protection from the weather, clothing?

IF YOU CANNOT ACT, LOOK FOR HELP OR TRAINED PEOPLE
People may react in various ways to a crisis immediately and in the following days.

Severity distressed people should not be left alone!

Try to keep them safe until the reaction passes or until you can find help.

 Seymour reactions

- children & adolescents
- people with health conditions or physical and mental disabilities

Look for people who are likely to need special attention

Disorientation
- Not knowing their own name, what happened...

Confused
- Emotionally numb or feeling unreal

Physical symptoms
- Shaking, headaches, feeling very tired, loss of appetite...

Irritability
- Anger, anxiety & fear

Not responding
- Not speaking at all

Guilt, shame
- For having survived or for not saving others

Crying, sadness, depressed mood, grief

Worrying that
- Something really bad is going to happen

Insomnia, nightmares
LISTEN

HOW TO LISTEN PROPERLY?

LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE HERE
Some people may not want to speak about what has happened. However, they may value it if you stay with them quietly, or offer practical support like a meal or a glass of water.

BE AWARE OF WORDS AND BODY LANGUAGE

Eye contact
Facial expressions
Gestures

IF YOU NEED TO TALK I AM HERE

Do not pressure anyone to tell you what they have been through.
1. **APPROACH RESPECTFULLY**

   CAN I HELP?

   Help the person feel comfortable. Find a safe and quiet place to talk. Offer water if you can.

2. **ASK**

   FIND OUT WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO THEM AT THIS MOMENT...

   PRIORITIZE

   ...AND HELP THEM WORK OUT WHAT THEIR PRIORITIES ARE

   I NEED...

   MY CAR
   MY BANK
   MY MUM
   FEED THE DOG
   TO CALL XYZ

3. **LISTEN**

   AND HELP THEM TO FEEL CALM

   Be patient and calm

   Stay close but keep an appropriate distance

   Listen if they want to talk about what happened

   Let them know that you are listening nod your head or say hmmmm...

4. **PROVIDE**

   FACTUAL INFORMATION, IF YOU HAVE IT

   Be honest about what you know and don’t

   I’LL TRY TO FIND OUT

   Acknowledge feelings & loss

   I’M SO SORRY I CAN IMAGINE THIS IS VERY SAD FOR YOU

   Acknowledge strength

   YOU HAVE BEEN STRONG

   Allow for silence to give the person time to share

**RESPECT PRIVACY & DIGNITY**

- If appropriate, keep the person’s story confidential
- Try to protect the person from exposure to the media
Some people may feel “out of it” or disconnected. For example, they may stay isolated or not answer. They may look “lost”, not know what happened or feel they don’t know where they are...

You can help them by following these tips!

**DO**

- Keep a calm & soft voice
- Remind them that you are here to help
- Remind them that they are safe, if it’s true
- Have kind eye contact
- Focus on your breathing, breath slowly
- Tap your fingers on your lap
- Place and feel your feet on the floor
- Look for non-distressing things around you
- What do you see here? Can you describe it?
DON'T THINK & ACT AS IF YOU MUST SOLVE ALL THEIR PROBLEMS!

They have to feel their strength and capacity to care for themselves.

DON'T

Don't interrupt or rush someone's story (don't look at your watch or speak rapidly...)

LET ME TELLYOU!

ARE YOU INSANE?

Don't talk about your own troubles

YOU SHOULDN'T FEEL THAT WAY

YOU'RE LUCKY YOU SURVIVED

Don't make up things you don't know

I PROMISE YOU...

Don't tell them someone else's story

I'LL DO IT FOR YOU

YOU CAN DO IT!!
Help people to help themselves to regain control of their situation

- Basic needs, such as shelter, food, water, sanitation, clothing, specific food for babies...
- Health services for injuries or help with chronic (long-term) medical conditions
- Clear & factual information about the event, loved ones & available services
- Being able to contact loved ones, friends & other social supports

Help people address basic needs and access services

⚠️ Follow up with people if you promise to do so
A PERSON IN DISTRESS CAN FEEL OVERWHELMED...

...Help them to consider their most urgent needs, and how to prioritise and address them.

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!

ENCOURAGE POSITIVE STRATEGIES

1. Eat as regularly as possible & drink water
2. Get enough rest
3. Spend time with family & friends
4. Discuss problems with someone you trust
5. Do activities that help you relax

DISCOURAGE NEGATIVE STRATEGIES

Don't isolate yourself
Don't sleep all day
Don't work all the time
Don't take drugs, smoke or drink alcohol
Don't neglect basic personal hygiene
Don't be violent
**What to Do?**

**Give Information**
- Only say what you know
- Do not make up information or give false reassurances
- Keep messages simple and accurate
- Repeat the message to be sure people hear and understand it

*Rumours will be common!*
Find out where to get correct information & when and where to get updates

**Inform People about Available Services & Help Them Access:**
- Health Services
- Family Tracing
- Shelter
- Food Distribution

**Connect People with Loved Ones & Social Support**
- People who feel they had good social support after a crisis cope better than those who feel they were not well supported

**Help Keep Families Together & Children with Their Parents and Loved Ones**

**Help People to Contact Friends & Relatives to Get Support**

**Help Bring Affected People Together to Support Each Other**

*Link*

**Keep Updated About:**
- State of the Crisis
- Safety Issues
- Available Services
- Condition of Missing People

*Make sure vulnerable people also know about existing services*
SPECIAL CARE FOR MEN & WOMEN

SEEKING HELP IS NOT A WEAKNESS

STRENGTH DOES NOT MEAN CARRYING THE BURDEN ON YOUR OWN

BEING STRONG MEANS TAKING CARE FOR YOURSELF & CARING FOR & ACCEPTING HELP FROM OTHERS

IT IS ALRIGHT TO SHOW EMOTIONS

IT IS IMPORTANT TO CARE OF YOURSELF, SO YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF OTHERS

VIOLENCE IS NEVER TO BE ACCEPTED, EVEN IN A DISASTER
CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS
ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE IN A CRISIS. IT DISRUPTS THEIR FAMILIAR WORLD & ROUTINES THAT MAKE THEM FEEL SECURE.

CHILDREN CORE BETTER WHEN THEY HAVE A STABLE & CALM ADULT AROUND THEM. WHEN CHILDREN ARE WITH THEIR CAREGIVERS, TRY TO SUPPORT THE CAREGIVER.

SPECIFIC DISTRESS REACTIONS
(IN ADDITION TO THE PREVIOUS ONES)

THINGS CAREGIVERS CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN

FOR ALL AGES, GIVE THEM EXTRA TIME & ATTENTION.

IF POSSIBLE, KEEP TO REGULAR ROUTINES & SCHEDULES (FOR FOOD, BEDTIME...).

INFANTS
- Return to earlier behaviors (e.g., bedwetting or thumb-sucking)
- Cling to caregivers
- Reduce their play or use repetitive play related to the distressing event

- Keep them warm and safe
- Keep them away from loud noises and chaos
- Speak in a calm and soft voice
- Give cuddles and hugs

SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN
- Believe they caused bad things to happen
- Develop new fears
- Become less affectionate
- Feel alone
- Become preoccupied with protecting or rescuing people

- Remember often that they are safe
- Explain that they are not to blame for bad things that happened
- Give simple answers about what happened without scary details
- Allow them to stay close to you if they are fearful
- Be patient with children who start demonstrating behaviors they did when they were younger
- Provide a chance to play and relax

ADOLESCENTS
- Feel “nothing”
- Feel different from or isolated from their friends, display risk-taking behavior & negative attitudes

- Provide facts about what happened and explain what is going on now
- Allow them to be sad
- Don’t expect them to be tough
- Listen to their thoughts & fears without being judgmental
- Set clear rules & expectations
- Ask them about the dangers they face, and discuss how they can be best avoided
- Encourage them to be helpful
VULNERABLE PEOPLE
PEOPLE WITH HEALTH CONDITIONS, PHYSICAL OR MENTAL DISABILITIES & SOME ELDERLY PEOPLE MAY NEED SPECIAL HELP

HELP THEM TO GET TO A SAFE PLACE
ASK PEOPLE IF THEY HAVE ANY HEALTH CONDITIONS OR IF THEY REGULARLY TAKE MEDICATION
HELP PEOPLE GET THEIR MEDICATION OR ACCESS MEDICAL SERVICES

BEING ABLE TO EAT, DRINK, GET CLEAN WATER
CARE FOR THEMSELVES
BUILDING SHELTER FROM MATERIAL DONATED BY AGENCIES
GIVE INFORMATION ON HOW TO ACCESS ANY SERVICE AVAILABLE

Stay with the person or try to make sure they have someone to help them if you need to leave.
Consider linking the person with a protection agency or other relevant support, to help them in the longer term.
It is normal to feel sad, upset, or to experience strong emotions. However, most people will feel better over time.

But, if 1 month after the event, you, or people around you, still experience distressful reactions, like nightmares, flashbacks, or intense sadness, it is time to seek professional help.

Talk with a health care professional with mental health training, if available.

They can help in a strictly confidential manner.
Take Care of Yourself

As a helper, you may feel responsible for people’s safety & care.

Remember that you are not responsible for solving everyone’s problems.

Help people help themselves!

Even during the crisis, take time for yourself. Manage stress by having healthy habits:
- Keep reasonable working hours to avoid exhaustion.
- Divide the workload among helpers, working in shifts during the initial recovery phase.
- Take regular rest breaks.

You may witness or experience terrible things (destruction, injury, death or violence) and hear stories of other people’s pain and suffering. All of these experiences can affect you.

Think about what helped you to cope with stress in the past.

Check how fellow helpers are doing. Find ways to support each other.

Talk about your experience of helping in the crisis situation with friends, loved ones or other people you trust for support.

Acknowledge what you were able to do to help, even in small ways. Accept the limits of what you could do in the circumstances.