

**2ND EDITION**

# PFA

**PSYCHOLOGICAL  
FIRST AID**

**STRONGER  
TOGETHER**



**A GUIDE TO HELP YOU & YOUR COMMUNITY**



# PAHO





The Pan American Health Organization and the Caribbean Development Bank 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, while considering safety recommendations to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19.

It will also bring to your attention the needs of specific groups, including men, women, children and adolescents, people with disabilities, and frontline workers, among others.

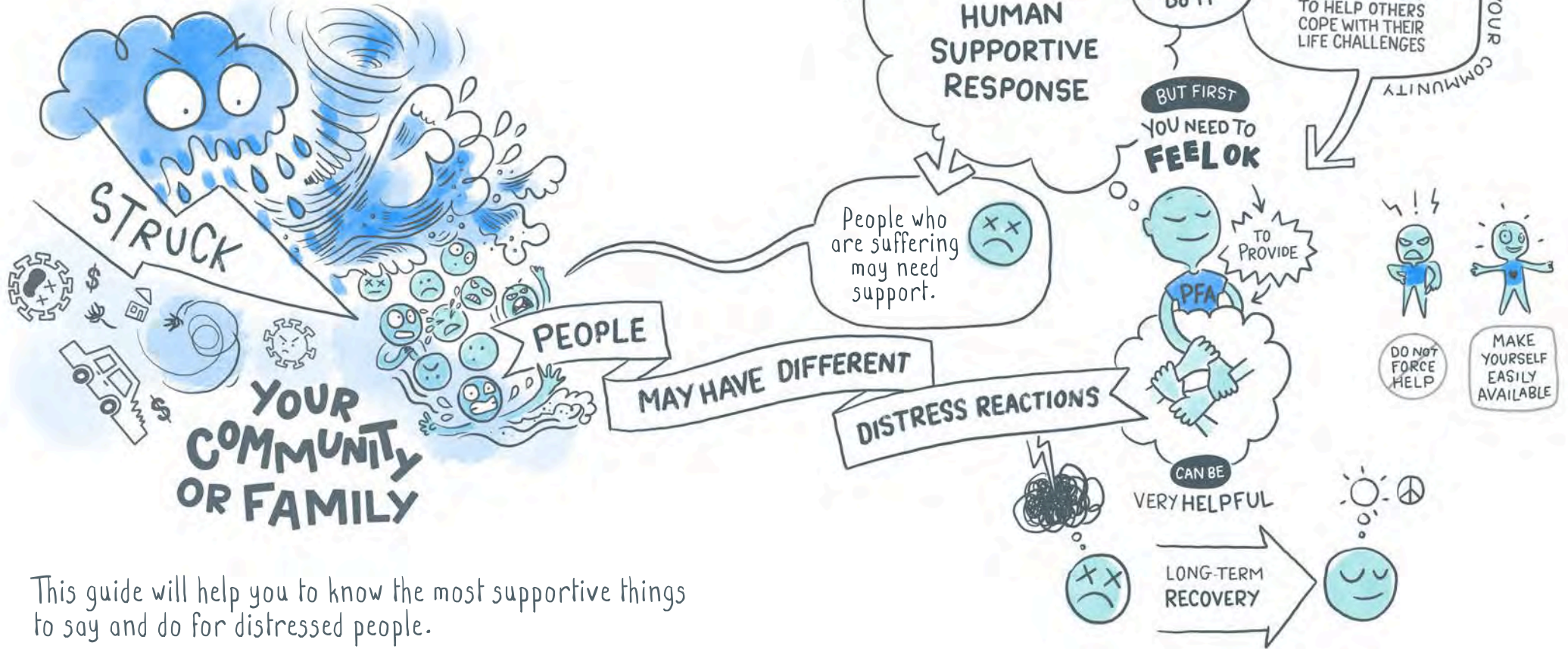
Only an adult should be a **PFA HELPER**.

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 CRISIS



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



**LOOK**

# YOUR SAFETY FIRST!



Crisis situations change rapidly :

- Weather conditions
- Flooding
- Buildings that may collapse
- Fire
- Safety during a traffic accident...



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

PFA should be provided by adults.



be calm



be safe



think before you act

# TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK:



Wash your hands regularly with soap and water or use an alcohol-based gel.



Cover your mouth with the inside of your elbow when you cough or sneeze or use a tissue and dispose of used tissue immediately and wash your hands.



Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.



Avoid sharing cups, plates or other personal items and disinfect all surfaces that are touched frequently.



Find out when and how to use personal protective equipment.



# OBVIOUS URGENT BASIC NEEDS

## LIFE-THREATENING CONDITIONS?



## BASIC NEEDS?

Shelter, food, water?



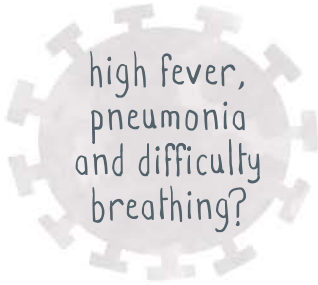
Protection from the weather, clothing?



Signs and symptoms of a severe case of COVID-19:



high fever, pneumonia and difficulty breathing?



Critically injured and in need of emergency, medical help?

Need rescuing, such as people trapped or in immediate danger?

IF YOU CANNOT ACT, LOOK FOR HELP OR TRAINED PEOPLE



People may react in various ways to a crisis, immediately after and in the following days or weeks.

Severely distressed people should not be left alone!

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

## SERIOUS DISTRESS REACTIONS

- children & adolescents
- people with health conditions or physical and mental disabilities
- older people
- families and friends of those affected
- people who have lost income, business or employment

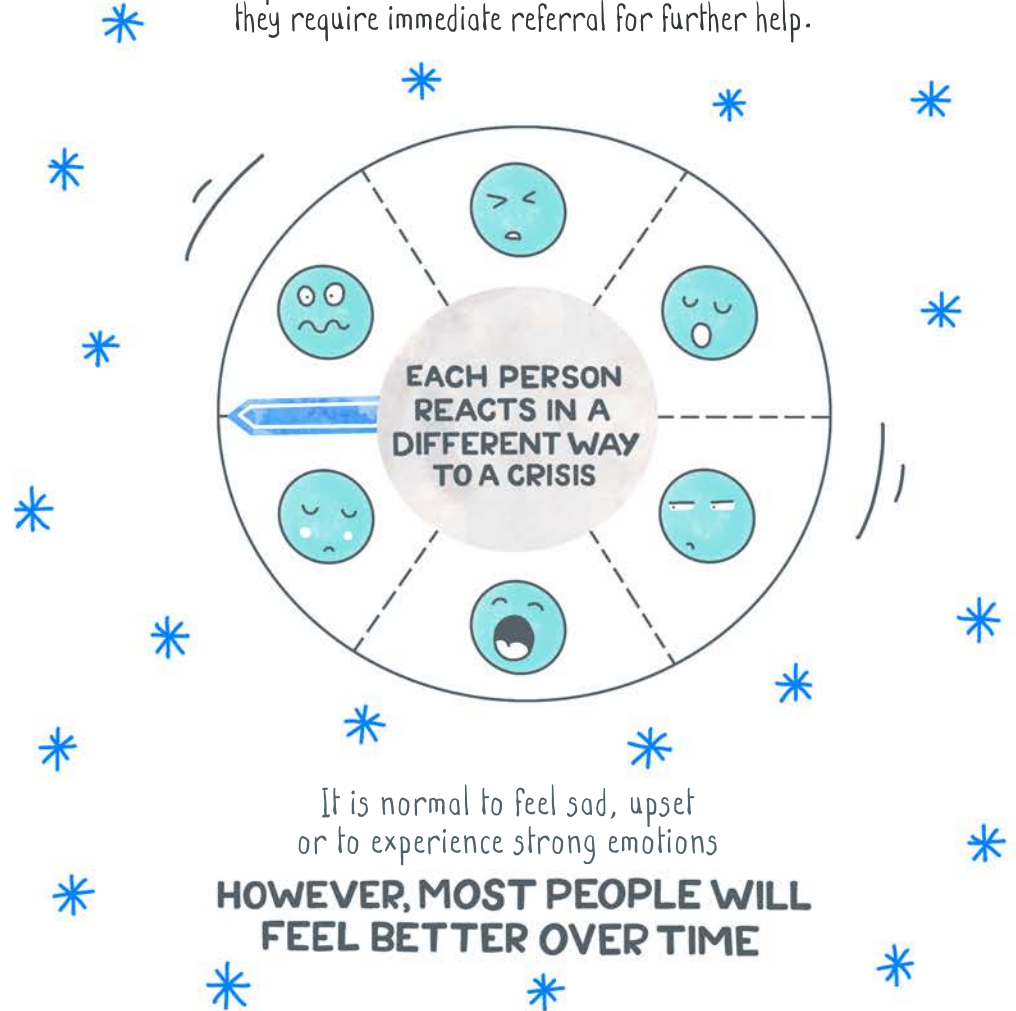
**LOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE LIKELY TO NEED SPECIAL ATTENTION**



An important part of LOOK is being able to differentiate expected from severe reactions and what to do if they require immediate referral for further help.

**EACH PERSON REACTS IN A DIFFERENT WAY TO A CRISIS**

It is normal to feel sad, upset or to experience strong emotions  
**HOWEVER, MOST PEOPLE WILL FEEL BETTER OVER TIME**





Some people may experience acute stress within one month, seek help if symptoms interfere with daily functioning

# DISORIENTATION

# CONFUSED

Not knowing their own name or what happened...

Emotionally numb, feeling "out of it" or disconnected

Anger, anxiety & fear



### "ON GUARD" JUMPY

# PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Shaking, headaches, feeling very tired, loss of appetite...

# IRRITABILITY

# CRYING, SADNESS, DEPRESSED MOOD, GRIEF

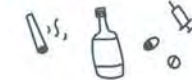
# LOSS OF CONTROL

or destructive behaviour



# GUILT, SHAME FOR HAVING SURVIVED OR FOR NOT SAVING OTHERS

# NOT RESPONDING NOT SPEAKING AT ALL



Excessive use of drugs or alcohol

# WORRYING THAT SOMETHING REALLY BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN



Safety first! Make sure that you, the person and others are safe from harm. If you feel unsafe, leave and get help. If you think the person may hurt themselves, get help (ask a colleague, call emergency services, etc.).

# MODERATE-SEVERE DEPRESSIVE DISORDER

Pay attention to symptoms that cause difficulty with daily functioning more than one month after the event:

- \* Low energy, fatigue, sleep problems
- \* Multiple persistent physical symptoms with no clear cause (e.g. aches and pains)
- \* Persistent sadness or depressed mood, anxiety
- \* Little interest in or pleasure from activities



# POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

- \* Re-experiencing symptoms (e.g. through frightening dreams, flashbacks or intrusive memories accompanied by intense fear or horror).
- \* Avoiding thoughts, memories, activities or situations that remind the person of the event.
- \* Excessive concern and alert to danger or reacting strongly to loud noises or unexpected movements.



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

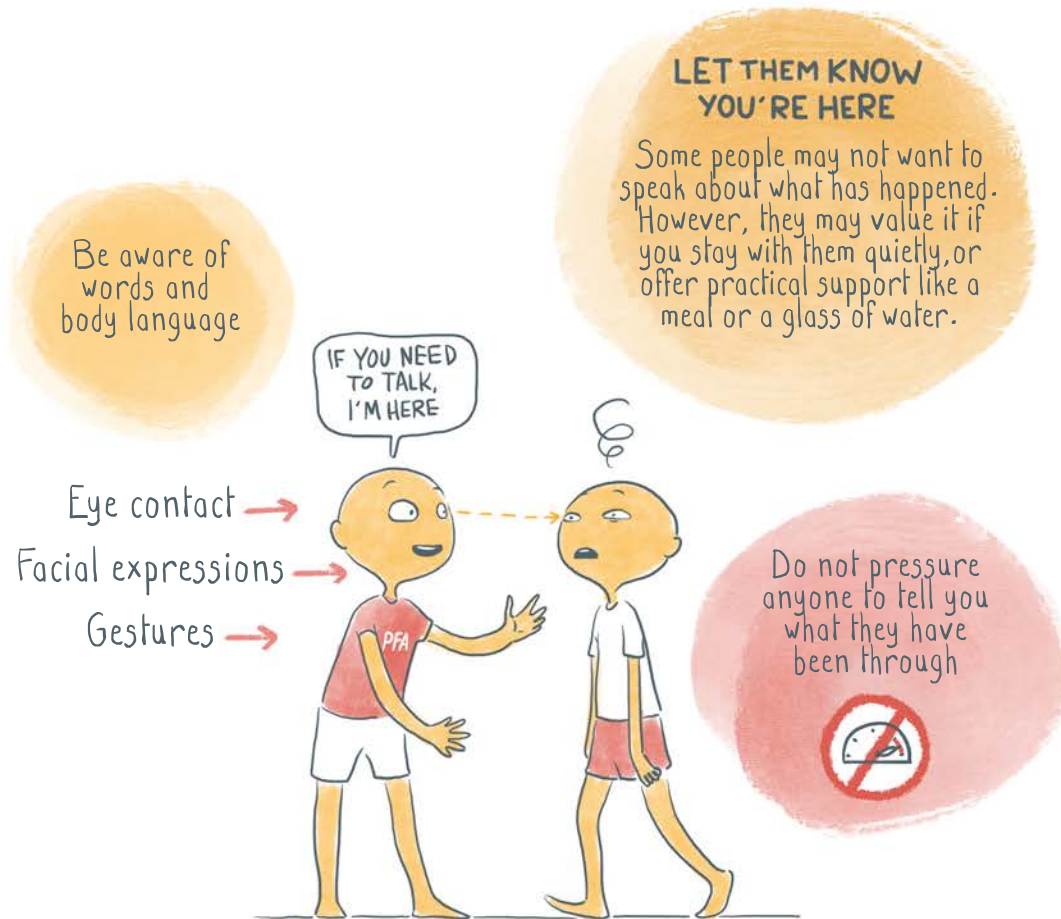
THEY CAN HELP IN A STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL MANNER





**LISTEN**

# HOW TO LISTEN PROPERLY



# REMOTE COMMUNICATION

If physical distancing is required, consider other ways of supporting one another

**✗** Stop other tasks if possible **(( Use a calm and supportive tone of voice ))** **✗** Allow for silence

If it is on a video call, face the person and show they have your full attention (e.g. by nodding or moving your head a little)



I can't come close or touch you, but I can listen and care about how you are feeling



If it is on a phone call, have the conversation in a private and quiet setting and respond to the caller every now and then to show you are listening (e.g. make small noises, like uh-huh, or 'hmm')

Use the phone to communicate through any physical barriers (e.g. you can see each other through the window while talking)

Check for specific needs or adaptations for communication (e.g. if they wear a hearing aid or require a sign language interpreter)



# 1 APPROACH

RESPECTFULLY



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



## RESPECT PRIVACY & DIGNITY



- IF APPROPRIATE, KEEP THE PERSON'S STORY CONFIDENTIAL

- TRY TO PROTECT THE PERSON FROM ANY UNWANTED ATTENTION

# 2 ASK

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



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



# 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 hmmm...

# 4 PROVIDE

FACTUAL INFORMATION, IF YOU HAVE IT

Be honest about what you know and don't know

I'LL TRY TO FIND OUT

Acknowledge strength

YOU HAVE BEEN STRONG

Acknowledge feelings & loss

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



Allow for silence to give the person time to share

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!

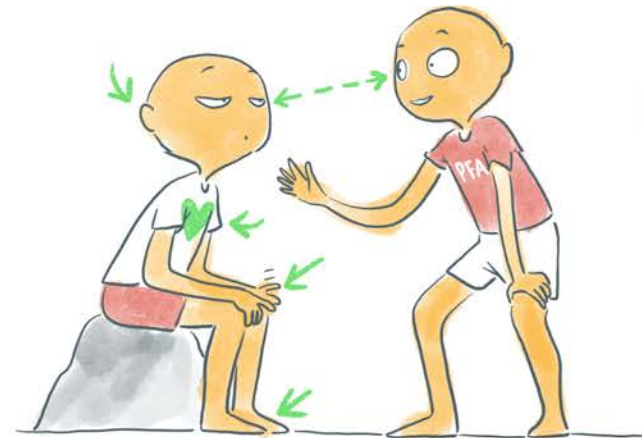
# DO

KEEP A  
CALM &  
SOFT VOICE

HAVE KIND  
EYE CONTACT

REMINDE THEM  
THAT YOU  
ARE HERE  
TO HELP

REMINDE THEM  
THAT THEY  
ARE SAFE, IF  
IT’S TRUE



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

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

LET ME TELL YOU!

ARE YOU INSANE?

Don't talk about your own troubles

TELL ME!!!

Don't make up things you don't know

YOU SHOULDN'T FEEL THAT WAY

I PROMISE YOU...

YOU'RE LUCKY YOU SURVIVED

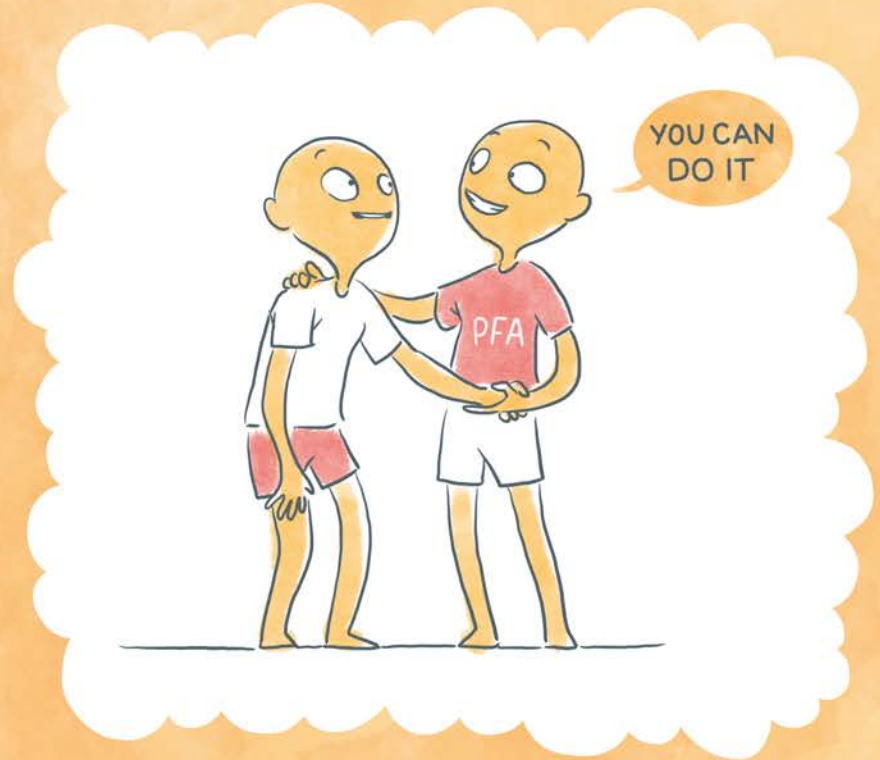
I'LL DO IT FOR YOU

Don't tell them someone else's story



## DON'T THINK & ACT AS IF YOU MUST SOLVE ALL THEIR PROBLEMS!

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





LINK





**LINK**

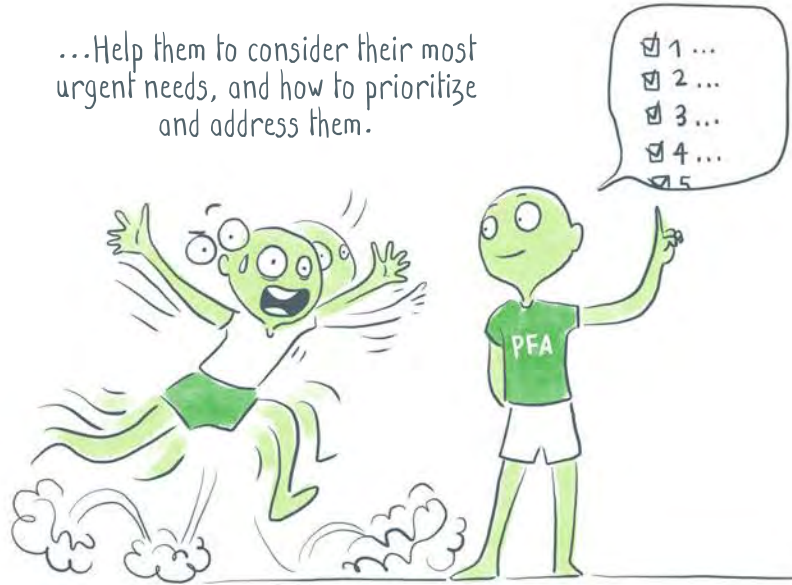
**HELP PEOPLE TO HELP THEMSELVES  
TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THEIR SITUATION**



Follow up with people if you promise to do so

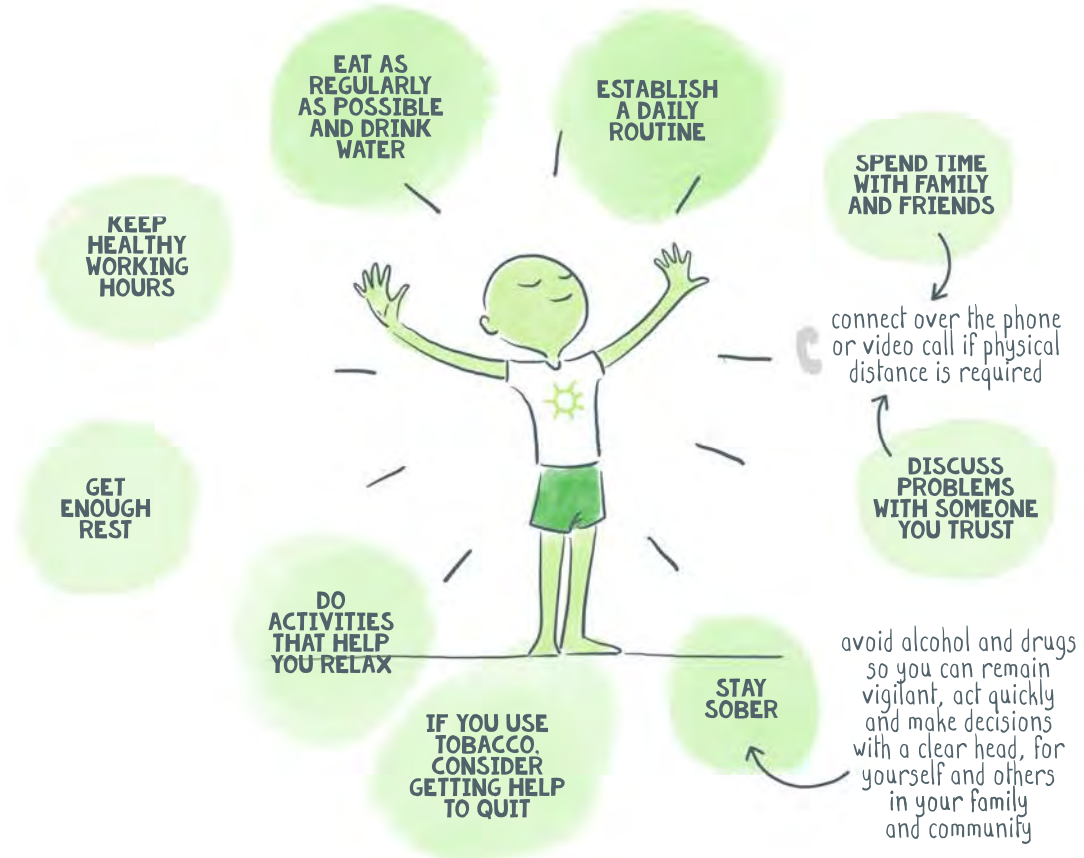
# A PERSON IN DISTRESS CAN FEEL OVERWHELMED

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





# WHAT TO DO?

**X** Avoid the near-constant stream of news and social media messages that cause you to feel anxious or distressed

**Rumours will be common!** Get the facts! Avoid fear and stigma!

## Seek information:

- At specific times during the day, once or twice
- From reliable sources (e.g. WHO/PAHO; local health authorities)
- To prepare your plans and protect yourself and loved ones

## Give information:

- Keep updated and 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

## Inform people about available services & help them access:

- Health services
- Family tracing
- Shelter
- Food distribution
- Protection services



Make sure that vulnerable people also know about existing services

# REMEMEBER TO KEEP YOUR TEEN SAFE ONLINE



Speak about online risks, explain that information they put out there stays out there.



Spend time with your child online.



Be alert to signs of distress, let them know they can come to you if something feels uncomfortable.



Create device-free times, for example when eating, playing, sleeping.



Use technology to set up a safe space: parental control, safe search and privacy settings.

# 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 AND CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS AND LOVED ONES



HELP PEOPLE TO CONTACT FRIENDS & RELATIVES TO GET SUPPORT



IF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IS HELPFUL FOR A PERSON, TRY TO CONNECT THEM WITH THEIR SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY



HELP BRING AFFECTED PEOPLE TOGETHER TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER.  
FOR EXAMPLE, ASK PEOPLE TO CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

HELP PEOPLE TO FIND SAFE WAYS TO GRIEVE,  
HONOUR AND REMEMBER THEIR LOST LOVED ONE.



If symptoms of grief interfere with daily functioning or persist for more than **6 months**, it is time to seek for help.





**SPECIAL  
CARE**

# SPECIAL CARE FOR MEN & WOMEN

SEEKING HELP IS  
NOT A WEAKNESS

STRENGTH DOES NOT  
MEAN CARRYING THE BURDEN  
ON YOUR OWN

SHARE HOUSEHOLD TASKS AND CARE  
RESPONSABILITIES AMONG EVERYONE IN YOUR  
HOUSEHOLD (MEN, WOMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS)

IT IS ALRIGHT TO  
SHOW EMOTIONS



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF,  
YOUR LIFE, YOUR HEALTH, YOU ARE OF VALUE!  
EVERY PERSON HAS THE RIGHT TO MAKE DECISIONS  
ABOUT THEIR BODY, WELL-BEING, HEALTH AND FUTURE



VIOLENCE IS NEVER ACCEPTABLE.  
EVERYONE DESERVES TO FEEL SAFE AT HOME,  
WHETHER DURING A DISASTER  
OR ANY OTHER SITUATION



# VIOLENCE IS NEVER JUSTIFIED

Risk of domestic violence can increase during any emergency, but remember that violence is never justified

## WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO:

Reach out to and support women, children and vulnerable persons.



Be aware of safety risks when contacting survivors, as the abuser may be present in the home.



Share information about available help.



Be prepared to call emergency services if urgent help is needed.



**VIOLENCE CAN TAKE MANY FORMS:**  
Verbal, Physical, Sexual, Emotional, Economic...

## IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING OR ARE AT RISK OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

Violence against you is never your fault.  
You are not to blame.  
Everyone deserves to feel safe in their home.



Reach out to trusted family and friends for practical help and support.



Make a plan to protect yourself and your children any way you can.



Find out about available services and seek support from a hotline, shelter or other health or protection services.



Reduce and manage stress as much as possible – e.g. through physical exercise and relaxation techniques.

## CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE IN A CRISIS.  
IT DISRUPTS THEIR FAMILIAR WORLD &  
ROUTINES THAT MAKE THEM FEEL SECURE.

CHILDREN COPE 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.: bed-wetting 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 them cuddles and hugs

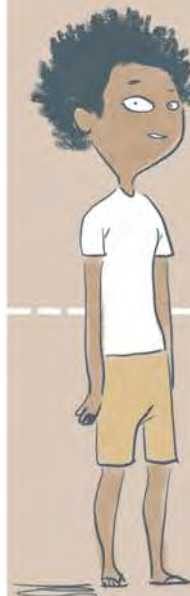
#### SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN



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

- Remind them 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 problem behaviors from when they were younger
- Provide a chance to play and relax

#### ADOLESCENTS



- Feel "nothing"
- Feel different from or isolated from their friends
- Display risky behavior & negative attitudes

- Provide facts about what happened and explain what is happening 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 & discuss how they can be avoided
- Encourage them to be helpful



# TIPS FOR PARENTS

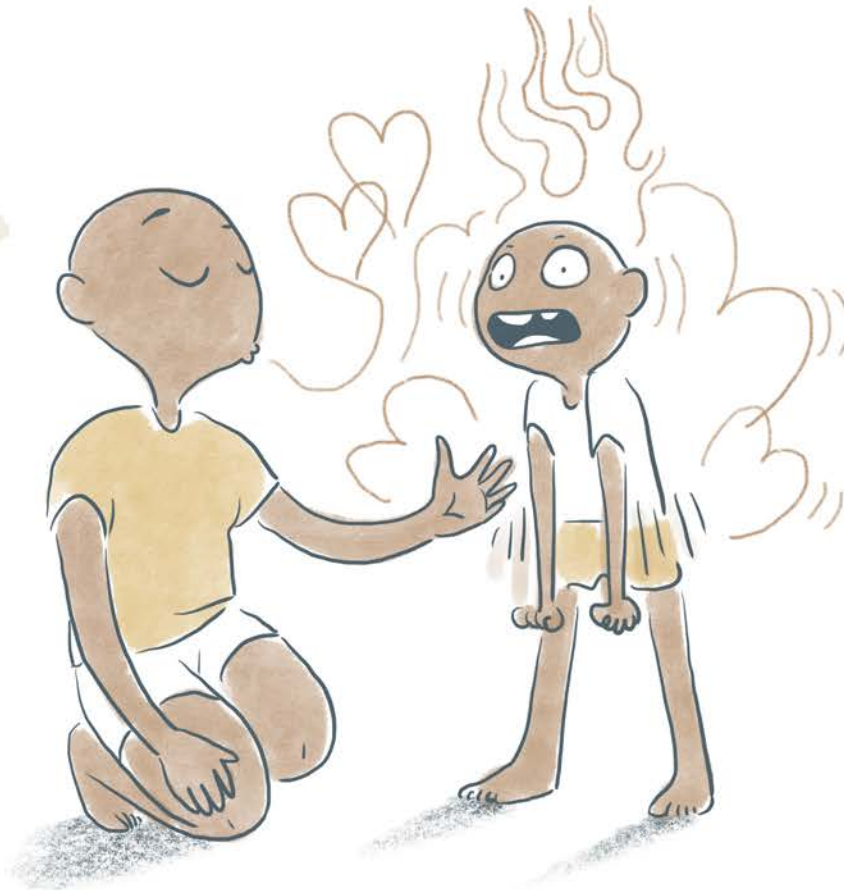
## TIPS TO KEEP IT POSITIVE

Be kind to everyone in the family, share the workload at home, and model the behaviour you would like to see in your children.

Get real: Can your child actually do what you are asking them?

Set aside one-on-one time, praise your child for being good, encourage consistent routines and simple jobs with responsibilities.

Redirect: Catch bad behaviour early and redirect your child's



## TIPS TO MANAGE BAD BEHAVIOUR

### || TAKE A PAUSE ||

Feel like screaming?

Shouting at your child will just make you and them more stressed and angrier.

Give yourself a 10-second pause. Breathe in and out slowly five times. Then, try to respond in a calmer way.

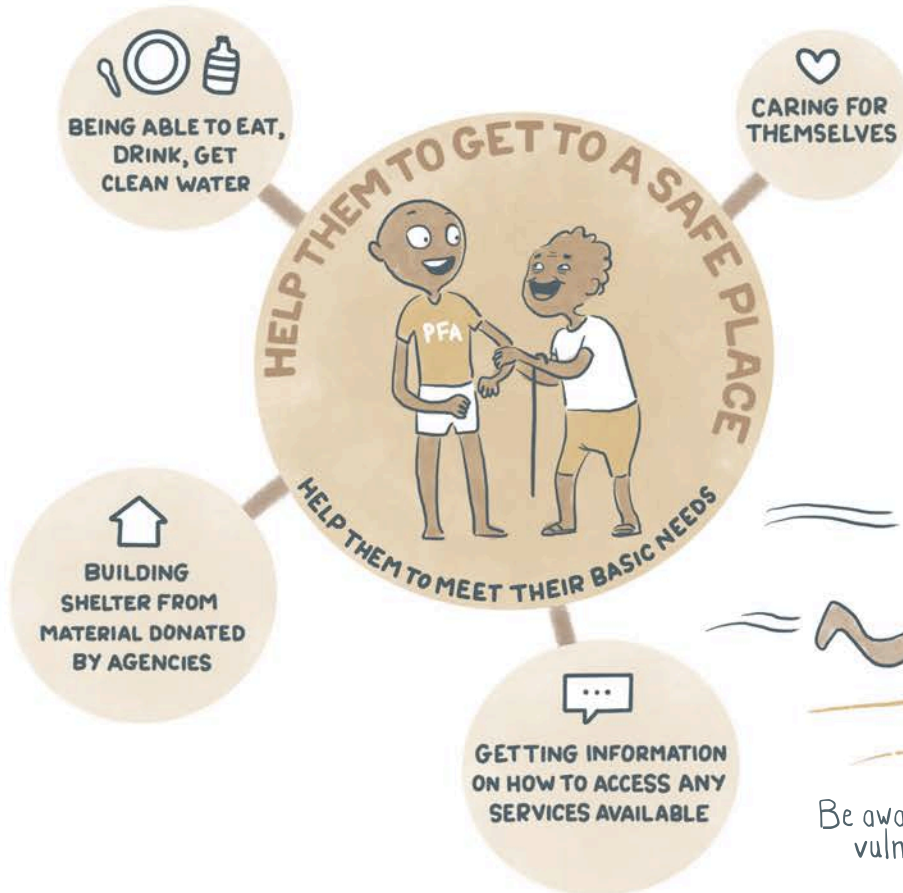
### → USE CONSEQUENCES →

Give a choice to follow your instruction; stay calm when giving the consequence, make sure you can follow through with the consequence.

For source materials and more information:  
<https://www.covid19parenting.com>

# VULNERABLE PEOPLE

PEOPLE WITH HEALTH CONDITIONS, PHYSICAL OR MENTAL DISABILITIES & SOME ELDERLY PEOPLE MAY NEED SPECIAL HELP



ASK PEOPLE IF THEY HAVE ANY HEALTH CONDITION OR IF THEY REGULARLY TAKE MEDICATION

HELP PEOPLE GET THEIR MEDICATION OR ACCESS MEDICAL SERVICES



Be aware of increased risk of violence against vulnerable people during any emergency

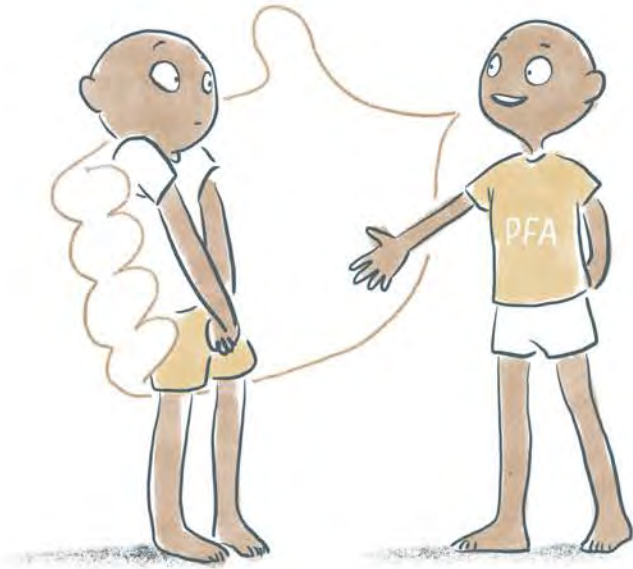
Stay with the person or try to make sure they have someone to help them if you need to leave

Consider linking the person with a protection agency or other relevant support, to help them in the longer term

# SUICIDE PREVENTION

The risk of suicide may increase in moments of crisis, but suicides are preventable.

If you know someone who may be considering suicide, talk to them about it.



Asking about suicide does not provoke the act of suicide. It often reduces anxiety and helps people feel understood.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Find an appropriate time and a quiet place to talk.
- Let them know that you are there to listen.
- Encourage the person to seek help from a professional. Offer to accompany them to an appointment.
- If you think the person is in immediate danger, do not leave him or her alone. Seek professional help from the emergency services, a crisis line, or a health-care professional, or turn to family members.
- If the person lives with you, ensure that he or she does not have access to means of self-harm (for example pesticides, firearms or medication) in the home.
- Stay in touch to check how the person is doing.



# 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!

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.



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.

## This guide will help you and your community to feel useful, safe, calm, connected and hopeful.

**LOOK** refers to how to assess the current situation, who needs support, safety and security risks, the immediate basic and practical needs, and expected emotional reactions.

**LISTEN** refers to how to begin the conversation and listen actively, calm someone in distress, ask about needs and concerns, and help find solutions.

**LINK** refers to how to assist with accessing information and connecting with loved ones, social support, services and other help.

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Psychological First Aid. Stronger Together. A Guide to Help You and Your Community. Second Edition  
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