

After the Crisis: Providing Psychological First Aid to the Traumatized

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More than ever before, the prevalence of traumatic events has reached a level of global saturation that positions each and every person as a potential victim. Whether it is a mass shooting at a shopping mall or university, an airline disaster or a severe weather event, the likelihood that either you or someone you care about will experience a traumatic event at some point during your lifetime is a definite possibility. With this in mind, what support is available to those who might be traumatized by a crisis event?

The concept of Psychological First Aid (PFA) is receiving considerable attention in the world of disaster mental health. The Medical Reserve Corps, created by the Office of the Surgeon General, has recommended PFA as a standard model of mental health intervention in early response to disasters and other traumatic events. In the corps' *Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide*, PFA is defined as: "[an] evidence-informed modular approach for assisting people in the immediate aftermath of disaster and terrorism [in order] to reduce initial distress and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning."¹

Now that we know what PFA is, let us consider how it is accomplished. PFA involves:

- Practical care and support that is nonintrusive and compassionate
- Assessing needs and concerns
- Listening and helping people connect to information and resources
- Addressing basic needs (i.e. food, water and shelter)
- Supporting positive coping efforts and encouraging an active role in recovery

Delivering Psychological First Aid

Reactions to a traumatic event can be as unique and varied as the individuals who experience the trauma. There is no standard reaction to trauma, and the same approach will not work for everyone when delivering PFA. The nature of the work requires an ability to adapt to a wide range of both people and emotions, while remaining aware your primary role is to assist the traumatized in a sensitive and practical manner in order to prevent any long-term psychological complications.

¹https://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/File/Promising_Practices_Toolkit/Guidance_Documents/Emergency_Preparedness_Response/MRC_PFA_04-02-08.pdf

The majority of communication is nonverbal. Approximately 80 percent of communication with others is *how* we communicate rather than the words we use, so maintaining consistent verbal and nonverbal communication is crucial. When you communicate verbally, tone, volume, cadence and pitch must be taken into account while also ensuring your body language is compatible with the information you are trying to convey.

Initial contact is most important, as it helps establish a person's openness to receiving additional assistance. When introducing yourself, provide your name and title and describe your role in the response effort. Ask for permission to speak with the individual. Try to ensure some level of privacy for the conversation; however, this may not always be possible. Give the person your full attention while speaking calmly, and ask if there is any specific need requiring immediate attention. If there are medical or safety concerns, these must be addressed prior to any additional support.

PFA focuses on helping survivors regain a sense of predictability, control, comfort, and safety. Providing information about the following will aid in facilitating this sense of normality:

- What is currently known about the event/response
- What to do next
- What is being done to best assist those impacted
- Resources available
- Typical stress reactions
- Coping and taking care of themselves, family members, pets and animals

Always use clear and concise language when relaying information. Inquire if the traumatized has questions about the information provided; if you do not have an answer to a question, inform them you will provide the information once it is made known to you. However, it is imperative to connect back – even if you do not have an answer for the question. People are placing a fragile trust in you for assistance, and that trust can be easily broken if you do not reconnect with them and recognize their concerns.

Following a traumatic event, the stressors involved may result in some individuals becoming frustrated, irritable and having difficulty managing their anger. Keep in mind the frustration and anger is with the situation – not with you. To address an emotionally charged person, acknowledge their frustration or anger, and ask if there is something immediate with which you can assist. Speak calmly and a bit quieter. This will force someone who is talking loudly to stop if they wish to listen and pay attention to what you have to say.

Remember, you can only control the situation, not the person. Nevertheless, if at any time an individual's anger appears uncontrollable or you feel threatened, seek immediate support from authorities.

The traumatized may be of different ethnicities, cultures or sexual preference. They may speak a different language or have alternative religious views. There is the likelihood you will encounter people with special needs, those who are chronically ill, the elderly, or children. With diverse populations, you must be very aware of your own – or another's – values and biases. Discussions with community cultural leaders can provide you with information about the community being served, including how emotions are expressed and attitudes toward outside assistance. If you discover you might not be the best person to assist in a particular situation, it is okay to find someone more suitable. The goal is always to ensure the traumatized feels comfortable and supported.

Normal Human Reactions to Traumatic Events

A traumatic event is extremely stressful and outside of an individual's normal range of experience, often occurring without warning and in such a way as to preclude preparation. Normal coping mechanisms can become strained, increasing the chances of psychological destabilization in the traumatized.

The following are examples of potential physical, psychological and behavioral reactions to trauma, which are normal for someone who has experienced a traumatic episode.

Normal physical reactions:

- Flight or fight response
- Increased sensory acuity
- Hyperventilation/dizziness
- Trembling/shaking
- Insomnia
- Nightmares
- Headaches and/or aches and pains

Normal psychological reactions:

- Shock, numbing and/or denial
- Time distortion
- Panic/anger
- Feelings of helplessness or a lack of control
- Inability to return to usual activities

Normal behavioral reactions:

- Irritability and/or outbursts of anger
- Crying
- Indecisiveness
- Withdrawal
- Expressions of guilt over actions or inactions

The factors that trigger these reactions can vary. Was there an actual or perceived threat to a person's life or to someone close to them? Was there any warning beforehand? How long did the event last - minutes, hours, days? Is there still a viable possibility for the threat to reoccur? Is someone still missing? An individual's level of exposure to death or destruction, the number of people affected by an event, and whether that event is natural or man-made will impact the reaction.

Personal factors also can influence reactions. Age, personality, previous life experiences, or different cultural/social aspects can all affect individual responses. Coping skills and support systems may not be sufficient or available immediately following the event. Survivors may feel guilt about something they did or did not do during a traumatic situation, placing blame on themselves. Uncovering these details is key to supporting survivors.

Help for the Helper

With so much focus on the survivors of a traumatic event, it is easy to overlook the serious psychological and physical impact the environment can have on you as a provider of PFA. After all, you can only take care of others if you take care of yourself first.

One way to ensure you can provide effective PFA is to enhance your psychological resilience. The American Psychological Association defines psychological resilience as, "the ability to adapt in the face of adversity, trauma or tragedy."² Those who are psychologically resilient can plan realistically and are equipped with effective problem-solving and communication skills. The following factors contribute to psychological resilience:

- Personal beliefs
- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Personal strengths
- Connections with others
- Diet/exercise

² <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

Practicing proper self-care is extremely important to your effectiveness as a provider of PFA. Keep your body healthy by managing stress, maintaining a healthy work/family balance and establishing boundaries. Meet basic needs by regularly eating meals and taking breaks from your work. Replace excessive use of caffeine, nicotine and alcohol with exercise to help burn off the adrenaline from the stress of an emotionally charged situation.

As you return home to your daily routine, be aware that you will need to integrate your experiences into your life. Take the time to reflect on the work you accomplished and the support you provided. Many PFA providers report a different outlook on life and value their family and friends more after helping others recover from a traumatic event. Others discover personal strengths they will continue to use in the future.

You will not be the same person you were when you first answered the call to respond to a crisis. Hopefully, you will have stretched your capability to connect with someone at the worst possible time of their life, while providing much needed relief.

The FEI Difference

FEI Behavioral Health was created to support and further the mission of its parent company, the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, by delivering services and resources to individuals in need throughout the world. These services include the training necessary to prepare individuals for the provision of PFA during crisis situations.

A leader in preparedness, response and recovery, FEI integrates behavioral health expertise, crisis management experience and technology to offer specialized crisis management services that address the human dimensions of disaster. Our unique set of activation experiences have enabled FEI to continually develop and improve upon a set of tested, proven comprehensive crisis management services that cover the crisis continuum from preparedness and training to response and support.

An extensive list of disaster responses has positioned FEI as the internationally-recognized leader in crisis preparedness and response readiness for mass casualty events. We have provided support to many Fortune 500 companies within the insurance, manufacturing, hospitality, financial, natural resources, sports and entertainment industries. We also support domestic and international airlines, colleges and universities and the federal government.

Our vast experience has allowed us to constantly improve our services, setting a standard of excellence in the crisis industry. FEI has:

- Extensive disaster and crisis management experience with integration of lessons learned as recently as 2012.
- Developed international standards of care for the crisis management industry.
- Successfully managed the challenge of responding to multiple events requiring simultaneous crisis response services in response to the events on 9/11.
- One-step notification of Family Assistance response and BMS Global Personal Effects recovery.
- A highly experienced Crisis Management On-Site Response team.
- A network of responders, proven to be leaders in the midst of an emergency, strategically located to be immediately deployed and available to support a response.
- Long-standing customer relationships throughout the world resulting in an increased understanding and respect of the cultures and the impact of a crisis.

Developing and employing Psychological First Aid in response to trauma scenarios is a vital skill that could potentially help those who have been traumatized take the first steps to recovery. FEI is here to help you plan for the resiliency of your workforce - and the people close to them - through the implementation of this essential tool.

FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.