

Providing Psychological First Aid: Support Staff

You are a valuable resource in times of crisis and an integral part of the school's recovery. Prior to any crisis, it is important that you know your school's emergency plan. Be familiar with the Incident Command Structure and procedures. Know where to ask questions or seek more information. School Resource Officers should coordinate plan with community responders to make sure that plans are familiar to all who may respond and are consistent. Below are ways that you can implement PFA-S.

PFA-S Core Action 1: Contact & Engagement

Remain Calm: In your various duties, you will be around students, parents, and other adults who may be in distress or expressing strong emotions. By remaining calm, this can help others calm.

Take the Initiative: Initiating contact and conversation can help to identify students or adults who may need assistance. Conversation starters can be as simple as "Do you need anything?" or "Are you ok?" Offering practical assistance (food, water) can help to initiate contact.

Monitor Changes in Others: Be watchful of changes in behavior in students or staff (e.g., not as talkative, changes in attire, less social, appears more angry). Report your concerns to the appropriate person at the school, such as a health-related professional or administration.

PFA-S Core Action 2: Safety & Comfort

Reassure Current Safety: Inform students that the adults are there to protect them and keep them safe. If the emergency is over, students, especially younger children, may need to be repeatedly told of their safety. Even when the emergency is still ongoing, children need to be assured that everything possible is being done to keep them safe.

Ensure Continued Safety: This may include assisting in the evacuation of a school or monitoring the interactions of others in a reunification area. When children are anxious, they often act out. If students are behaving in an unsafe manner, calmly convey the rules and what is expected of them. If the behavior continues, alert the school resource officer or administration.

Watch for High-Risk Student Behavior: After a crisis, students may increase substance use or participate in other high-risk behaviors (e.g., driving recklessly, initiating fights), endangering themselves or others. If you see this behavior or hear such concerns, report the matter to administration or school resource officer.

PFA-S Core Action 3: Stabilization

Support Those Overwhelmed: Some students and staff may show signs of distress. Remain calm and see if the person calms after a few minutes. See if you can assist with any current needs or reassure current safety. If the individual has difficulty calming, seek out a health-related professional to provide further assistance.

Stabilize the School Environment: Calmly convey to the students that the staff and administration are continuing to monitor the situation and will address any concerns they might have. Students are often anxious when facing trauma-related chaos, changes, and transitions. Providing them with a calm, supportive environment with clear rules and expectations will help them regain a sense of security and normalcy.

Identify Possible Reminders: Take steps, to the extent possible, to eliminate potential reminders in the school that may cause distress to others (e.g., not using the same signal to call the custodian that was used in the emergency).

PFA-S Core Action 4: Information Gathering

Identify Current Needs: Ask simple, respectful questions to determine how you may help. If the person needs assistance beyond what you can offer, connect them to a teacher, health-related professional, or whoever else is needed.

Know the Referral System: Make sure you are educated about how to refer students who need help. Learn about the warning signs and developmentally-specific signs that a student is at-risk.

PFA-S Core Action 5: Practical Assistance

Don't Underestimate the Importance of Practical Assistance: Assisting with practical needs is a protective factor that enhances recovery. You can play an important role in identifying the needs of students and staff and to identify barriers to obtaining resources. Link students and staff to those who are coordinating services at the school or an agency contact who can provide these services in the community.

Attend to Needs: Ensure that requests for supplies and delivery of items requested are coordinated and communicated throughout the staff. Work with other staff to help with such things as transportation, monitoring the reunification site, and so forth. While some of these activities may be beyond your typical job responsibilities, helping with practical needs is essential and may require you to expand your role.

PFA-S Core Action 6: Connection with Social Supports

Help to Connect with Supports: Help students to connect with family members, teachers, aides, coaches, or those they find as a comfort. Also help students to gather together and encourage them to support each other. You can make recommendations specific to extramural student group activities that may provide a venue for social support.

Keep Watch for Withdrawn Students: Observe students who may be isolating or limiting their social interactions with others. Check in with students and ask if they are okay. For new students, introduce yourself and welcome them.

PFA-S Core Action 7: Information on Coping

Provide a Recovery Milieu: After a crisis, all at the school should create an environment that enhances recovery. Encourage those that need help to seek support or other assistance during the school day as needed.

No One Way to Recover: You could often get questions from others about the natural course of recovery. Emphasize that there is not one way to recover and that different people will recover at different points in time. Most importantly, emphasize that everyone should respect individual differences.

PFA-S Core Action 8: Link with Collaborative Services

Provide Information on Available Services: In coordination with school policy, pass out handouts or know the official websites that will list available services at the school and in the community and the steps required to access them.

Facilitate Access to Services: To ensure that students and staff get connected to relevant services, help make the calls, double-check that the agency is accepting referrals, and address any concerns students or staff might have about the services.

In the days and weeks following an emergency, the school often becomes a recovery milieu. Everyone plays an important role in the recovery of the students and the school community. By utilizing the suggestions in this handout, you can help students recover and succeed academically, psychologically, and socially. These strategies can also help you and your family. Most importantly, don't forget to take care of yourself during these stressful times.