

# Psychological First Aid for Young Peers

A handbook





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## Introduction

Learning about PFA as a young person unpacks what it means to be a compassionate friend and more! It strengthens your skills in being a good listener and in offering practical help to someone without making that person dependent. It increases your awareness about your own self-care too. And you get support as a PFA young peer so that you do not have to carry the task of helping someone alone.

This handbook and the two-day training on PFA linked with it give you the skills and knowledge to help others who may be in distress or in difficulty. As a result, you will have the confidence to reach out and offer personal support to your friends or more formally as a volunteer in response to an incident where help is needed by a National Society or other community group.

## Why is Psychological First Aid (PFA) helpful?

PFA is a structured way of supporting someone who needs help. It involves caring about a person in difficulty, paying attention to their reactions and how they feel, listening to them, and if needed, providing practical help. It helps to make a young person in difficulty feel that someone is there for them who can support them.

PFA skills include knowing:

- how to approach someone who may need help
- how people can feel in difficult situations
- how to calm someone who is distressed
- how to help someone find the practical help they may need
- how to recognise severe signs of distress and to make referrals to the appropriate services.

PFA can be used to respond to a wide range of different problems and challenges. It is used in situations involving groups of people affected by large scale events such as after a major road accident, or after an extreme weather event such as high winds and floods damaging a school, or a humanitarian crisis where, for example, people have been forced to leave their home. These kinds of events would involve

## PFA is...

- Helping someone in difficulty to feel safe and calm
- Finding out about what they need and what they are worried about
- Making sure they do not come to more harm or face danger
- Providing emotional support and being there for someone
- Helping someone to solve their immediate problem such as contacting someone known to them who can come to pick them up
- Helping someone to find out where to get the help they need from services in the community.

## PFA is not...

- Something only professionals and experts can do
- Psychological therapy or counselling
- Asking someone to think about the reasons why things have happened, or what the deeper meaning is behind it
- Asking someone to tell every detail of what has happened to them
- Putting pressure on someone to share their feelings about what has happened to them.

a response by a National Society (or other official responders) and PFA would be provided by volunteers under the coordination of the National Society.

PFA can also be helpful in offering support on an individual basis. Situations may include young people having problems with friends, disruption in families caused by parents separating in difficult circumstances, pressures associated with school, college or work, conflict with parents, teachers or other adults in authority, issues associated with body image or being bullied, including on social media. There may be difficulties linked with relationships with

partners or navigating the early stages of forming sexual and gender identity and sexual partnerships, or in relation to sexual or physical abuse including online violence and exposure to pornography. Young people may also be exposed to drugs and alcohol misuse.

Young peers may provide PFA in these situations as a volunteer helper in school or in a community group or college, or sometimes as a friend. Young people are affected by these kinds of difficulties in many different ways depending on their age, culture, the supports they have available and their personality. They can experience stress or distress as a result of daily difficulties that happen or because of larger scale events such as described above. Reactions such as not being able to get a situation out of your mind or feeling anxious for a while about being with other people are natural reactions and are very common to most young people involved in abnormal events. If these reactions continue over a long period of time however, it is likely that specialist support is needed.

## PFA for young peers

This package is for young people between the ages of 12 and 23 years. 'Peers' are people of around the same age and stage who share the same kind of experiences, which makes it easy for them to understand one another. The definition used in the training is **A peer is someone the same age as you, equal to you, someone with whom you share similarities.**

As you may know, between the ages of 12 and the early 20s, peer relationships are very important. Young people of the same age may find that they prefer to share their problems with their peers and friends rather than the adults around them.

The idea of this package is therefore that young peers can help and support each other by using PFA. Once you have done the PFA training you will be able to offer peer support in person, over the phone, or remotely, depending on the context or what feels right for the individuals involved.

There are three key action principles in PFA which provide a helpful structure in offering help to someone in distress. They are LOOK, LISTEN and LINK. In the real world, helpers typically find that they move between each of these principles more than once before they complete the task of helping someone.

The box below summarises what each principle means:



### **LOOK** for

- information on what has happened and is happening
- who needs help
- safety and security risks
- physical injuries
- immediate basic and practical needs
- emotional reactions.

### **LISTEN** refers to how the helper

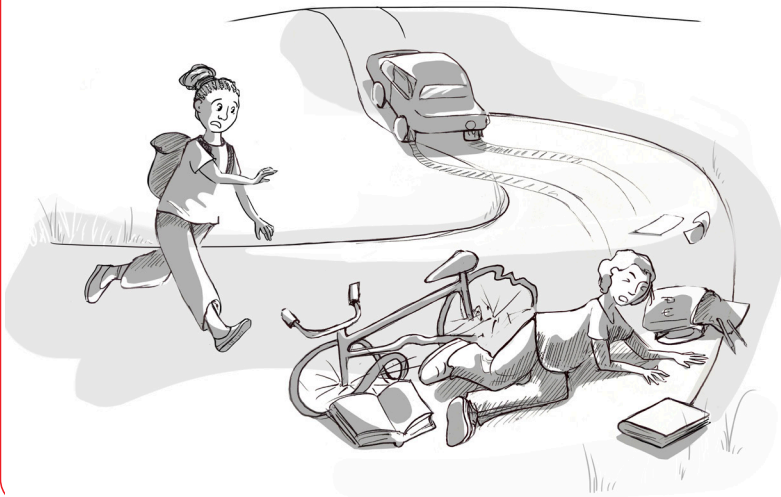
- approaches someone
- introduces oneself
- pays attention and listens actively
- accepts others' feelings
- calms the person in distress
- asks about needs and concerns
- helps the person(s) in distress find solutions to their immediate needs and problems.

### **LINK** is helping people

- access information
- connect with loved ones and social support
- tackle practical problems
- access services and other help.

## A road accident

Johanna is on her way to school and sees a classmate, Bill, on a bike being hit by a car. The car does not stop. Bill is on the ground, crying. His bike has been badly damaged and his bag of books is all over the road. Johanna carefully runs across to Bill and waves the approaching cars to a stop. She looks to see how badly injured Bill is. He seems to have broken his arm, though Johanna is not sure. She moves the bike to the side of the road as quickly as she can and carefully helps Bill to the footpath. She calls an ambulance and then calls Bill's parents. She speaks to Bill and tells him that help is coming. She asks him how he is feeling and if he needs anything. Johanna reassures Bill that help is on its way. She explains that she will stay with him until it arrives. She tells him his parents are also coming and that his bike is safe. Johanna gathers up all Bill's books and puts them back in his bag. She keeps an eye on Bill to see how he is doing and if the pain is getting worse. The police and ambulance come and Johanna explains what has happened. Bill is taken to the hospital, but Johanna stays with the bike and waits for Bill's parents to arrive. She explains what has happened and tells them which hospital Bill has gone to.





## A. LOOK

### LOOK

The action principle 'Look' refers to assessing:

- information on what has happened and is happening
- who needs help
- safety and security risks
- physical injuries
- immediate basic and practical needs
- emotional reactions.

In PFA, LOOK refers to how you look at a situation to see if it is safe to offer help. You have to assess what kind of help is needed and whether or not you can provide help. LOOK also means noticing how the person in distress is reacting. What is the best type of safe and effective support they need?

## B. LISTEN

### LISTEN

LISTEN refers to how the helper

- approaches someone
- introduces oneself
- pays attention and listens actively
- accepts others' feelings
- calms the person in distress
- asks about needs and concerns
- helps the person(s) in distress find solutions to their immediate needs and problems.

In PFA, LISTEN refers to the way you communicate with a person in distress - from the moment you approach and start to interact with that person. It involves active listening. Listening is not only what we do with our ears. That is hearing. Listening is being present, paying

attention, and making sure you understand what the person is saying. It is listening to find out about what someone is feeling and what they need. It is being open, inquisitive, and sensitive to what the person is experiencing. For example, LISTEN can mean repeating back to someone what they have said, asking them if this is what they meant, and allowing them to speak.

## CASE

### Listening to a friend

David and Jae have been friends for years and go walking together every weekend. One day on one of their walks, Jae tells David that he has started to feel sad all the time. He cannot sleep as well as before, and he feels like he has nothing to look forward to. He feels hopeless. He says he has been pretending everything is fine, as he didn't want to worry his friends or family. David is surprised to hear this, but listens while Jae gradually tells him about his problems. David does not ask lots of questions, but listens attentively, sometimes nodding his head to show Jae he is paying attention to what he is saying. He does not offer solutions, but asks Jae what he thinks would help him to feel better, and if there is anything he needs. David takes Jae home and makes him a hot drink before leaving him.

That evening, David calls to see how things are, and tells Jae that he is there for whenever he needs to speak to someone. He asks if he can visit him the following day. As promised, David goes to Jae's home and asks if there is anything which would help.

Jae decides to speak to someone who can provide professional help, and they both look for resources in the area which would suit. David offers to accompany Jae to the appointment when it is made and wait for Jae to come out. They agree to go to a café afterwards. David reminds Jae that he will be there for him as long as he needs.



## C. LINK

### LINK

Link refers to helping the person in distress

- access information
- connect with loved ones and social support
- tackle practical problems
- access services and other help.

LINK actions mostly have practical outcomes. This involves you helping the person in distress to access information, connecting them with others or with other services where they can get more information. For example, LINK involves connecting people to loved ones and social support. LINK also means thinking about the inner resources that a peer and you are bringing to the situation. As an example, the ability to stay calm and focussed will help in managing a potentially challenging situation.

It is very important that you have information on local services and therefore there is a list at the end of this booklet giving contact details for referral.



### Signs of severe distress

If a person in distress has strong emotional reactions that start to interfere with their daily functioning over a longer period of time, they should be referred for professional mental health support, if available.

Signs of severe distress may include:

- When someone may not have been able to sleep for over a week and seem confused and disorientated.
- When someone is so distressed that they are unable to function normally and care for themselves, for example by not eating or keeping clean, despite food and washing facilities being available.
- When someone loses control of their behaviour and behaves in an unpredictable and destructive manner.
- When someone threatens to harm themselves or others.
- When someone uses drugs or alcohol excessively.

## Shocking news

Ivan plays basketball every week. One day, Anna, one of the players, is called out of the training session to receive the news that her sister has been involved in a terrible accident. Anna is completely shocked and stunned. Her phone died as they were giving the details so she doesn't know which hospital her sister has been taken to. Ivan leaves the game and goes over to Anna. He offers to call someone to help. He gets Anna's emergency contact details from the basketball coach and calls that person to ask them to come to pick up Anna. He collects Anna's belongings from the changing room and gets her a drink of water. He waits with her in a quiet corner away from the basketball game until her family arrives and stops a team member from taking a photo of Anna. While they are waiting, Ivan asks Anna how she is feeling. He listens to Anna speaking about how shocked she is. Anna is worried that her family will not come quickly. Ivan reassures her that they are on the way, and asks her again if there is anything else she needs, if she would like him to call someone else. Ivan goes outside briefly to check whether the car is coming and when he sees it, he accompanies Anna to her family.



## Do no harm

It is really important to be aware that even from the best of intentions it is possible to cause harm when helping. The following considerations are therefore vital in offering PFA respectfully and responsibly:

Respect the person's trust and privacy:

- If you break someone's confidentiality, the person you are supporting may feel betrayed. However, if you are worried that the person is in danger, or is at risk to themselves or others, you may pass on their personal details to specialist services.

Give emotional and practical support:

- Offer support within the boundaries of PFA. If you ask lots of probing questions about what happened, you may make the person feel more stressed.

Listen actively:

- If you become distracted by your phone or by something that is happening around you, the person will not feel listened to and respected. Active listening with attention on the person in distress is vital to PFA.

Be open to what the person is feeling and telling you:

- If you judge the person or tell them they have done something wrong, the person may feel guilty or ashamed, and will not feel able to ask for help. This will create a barrier to support being received.

Allow the person to make their own decisions:

- If you tell someone what to do to solve a problem or patronise them, it may not be the best solution for them. By helping the person to make their own decisions, you help them to be in control of their situation and find a solution which is right for them.

Be honest and trustworthy and say if you don't know something:

- Even though you may want to make everything better and fix a problem, it is important to be honest so that you do not raise someone's hopes, or make them believe that something will happen when it may not.

Know when something is too difficult for you to handle:

- Some problems are too big for one person to handle. Be honest about what you are capable of doing and do not overestimate your helping skills. This will make sure you do not become worried about your capacity to help, and the person will know exactly how you will support them.

Let people know they can ask for help later if they do not want help now:

- Sometimes people may not want help immediately. Let the person know you are there, and they can contact you at a later time. If you push someone to receive help when they are not ready, you may cause more stress and the person may feel pushed into doing something they do not want.

End your help respectfully:

- If you stop helping too quickly or without explaining what other support is available and how the person can access it, the person may feel lost or confused.

## Self-care and support

It is very important for helpers of any kind to look after themselves as well as the people they are helping. This is called self-care. This might seem like a strange idea but there is an expression, “You cannot pour from an empty cup”. This means that it is hard to be there for someone and offer friendship and help, if you feel drained or tired or burned out yourself. Everyone feels like that at times - it is not a sign of weakness. There are ways to stay happy and healthy and not be overstressed by offering help to others.

For example, use the action principles of LOOK, LISTEN and LINK for your own self-care:

**LOOK:** Observe how you are feeling and how you respond to what is happening around you. Learn to recognise signs of stress or burn out in yourself.

**LISTEN:** Listen to how your reactions and inner feelings affect you. Sometimes you may have inner thoughts telling you that you don't feel like doing something – you're too tired or don't feel motivated, or how unfair things are. Perhaps you feel physically unwell, perhaps your sleep is affected, perhaps you feel like spending more time alone, or you are becoming irritable with friends and family

Acknowledge and accept your feelings - they are real, and it is a very positive step that you have identified them!

Try to identify what is stopping you from doing things which help you to relax, or activities you enjoy. Maybe you have not yet identified any activities which could help, perhaps you can listen to yourself and your needs to try and find something to do which you enjoy and are good for you. Engage in activities that can help to protect your wellbeing depending on what you like and what is accessible.

**LINK:** Link with others. Reach out to others for support. You could speak to your friends or peers about what is worrying you, or you could simply call or meet them for a chat or a shared activity such as a walk, a trip out, or some sporting activity you both enjoy.

If you feel that you need to speak to someone in particular, or you need some more focused help, reach out for support. Perhaps you could invite a friend to help you do this.

As a young peer offering PFA, it is helpful to have a supervisor or mentor to be available to provide support. This may be a teacher who is familiar with PFA or a National Society volunteer coordinator who is available on a regular basis to volunteers after they have been involved in responding to an incident. You should be clear about the kind of support being offered to you and how often you can access support.

## Making referrals\*

The table below lists local services and includes contact details so that young peers can make referrals if needed.

Referral services	Contact details
Emergency services	
Police	
Fire	
Ambulance	
Child protection services	
Health services	
Counselling services for young people	
SGBV help and support	
LGBTQIA+ counselling services	

\*Information on local services should be provided by the facilitators of the PFA training which accompanies this handbook



## Psychological First Aid for Young Peers. A handbook

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