

10 Tips for Teaching the Psychological First Aid Model for K-12 Education Agencies

Purpose of the Psychological First Aid Model

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-informed intervention model to assist students, staff, and families in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or emergency event, and can be used by any trained staff member or school administrator. PFA is designed to reduce the initial distress and trauma caused by emergencies, and to help students return to their usual school-based activities after such an event. By using these brief and effective interventions in the form of the five steps of **PFA (Listen, Protect, Connect: Model, and Teach variant)**, schools can provide a long-lasting, positive influence on trauma-related stress.

Core Elements of the PFA Model

PFA is a five-step program that provides educators guidelines on how to speak with students and peers who have experienced an emergency event or disaster. Each step is formulated to help teachers reduce distress and facilitate students and peers' return to the classroom. The steps are based on a model of cognitive learning that helps people put their experiences and feelings into words, provides support and encouragement, engages users in practical problem solving, models calm and optimistic behavior, and teaches others about how traumatic stress affects human behavior. To learn more, please check out <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/132712> on PFA or our "[Helpful Hints](#)" publication that gives more details about each of the five **LPC PFA** steps mentioned below. We also offer this publication in [Spanish](#).

Listen: School staff should provide peers and students with an opportunity to share their experiences and express feelings of worry, anxiety, fear, or other concerns about their safety. It's important to establish rapport and trust as quickly as possible. Your intent in listening to the person speaking to you about his or her crisis is that you want to convey your interest and your empathy.

Protect: To avoid any possibility of re-traumatization, school staff members should try to re-establish feelings of both physical and emotional safety. This can be done in many ways, including providing a calm routine or offering information about events surrounding the emergency event, such as what is being done in the community and the school to keep everyone safe.

Connect: In this step, we help students and peers re-establish their normal social relationships and stay connected to others in order to experience social support. One of the most common reactions to trauma or fear is emotional and social isolation and the sense of loss of social supports. Restoring and building connections promotes stability, recovery, and predictability in people's lives.

Model: Teachers and other school personnel who are affected by an emergency event may not know exactly how they will navigate the process of recovery, but they can acknowledge the distress and needs of others and demonstrate a positive and optimistic approach. Through their example, they demonstrate that adults can effectively cope with the stress despite the fear or loss they experience.

Teach: School counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers can teach faculty students, staff, families, and volunteers about common reactions to the emergency event or disaster, such as the fact that children and youth may have more difficulty with learning after the specific event. They can help

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID TIP SHEET

educators and students become familiar with the range of normal reactions that can occur immediately after a traumatic event or disaster.

10 Tips for Implementing Each Element of the PFA Model

Use the following 10 tips to support implementation of the PFA model before, during, and after emergency events. Share it with all school staff members, including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and afterschool staff.

1. **Listen to staff:** Administrators should find opportunities for staff members to share their concerns for themselves or others when coping after an emergency.
2. **Listen to students:** All staff members should let students know they are available to listen or willing to connect students with the appropriate professional. Encourage staff members to listen and observe any changes in behavior or mood, school performance and attendance, or interactions with other students and staff.
3. **Protect students:** Avoid the possibility of any re-traumatization by freeing the environment of anything that could re-traumatize individuals, such as showing videos of similar tragedies or speaking continuously about news stories that contain repeated reminders of the emergency event or disaster. Please see our [Protection Fact Sheet](#) for more information.
4. **Protect the school culture:** To the best of your ability, limit unnecessary changes in the school environment by maintaining daily routines, activities, and structure with clear and consistent expectations and rules.
5. **Connect policy to practice:** Incorporate trauma-informed practices into emergency policies and procedures to address and mitigate the impact of traumatic events on students and staff. Our [Trauma-Informed Care for Schools Webinar](#) discusses how schools can address trauma in their emergency operations plans.
6. **Connect with the whole school community:** Connect with community partners, including local law enforcement, mental/behavioral health professionals, and parents, to continuously provide resources that are supportive of a healthy school environment. Our [Student Perceptions of Safety Fact Sheet](#) will provide you with more information.
7. **Train administrators to model trauma-informed behaviors when interacting with staff:** Staff members will look for verbal and nonverbal clues from administrators and other leadership on how to best respond after an emergency event. By modeling trauma-informed behaviors, you can increase the likelihood that staff members will respond similarly.
8. **Train teachers to model trauma-informed behaviors when interacting with staff:** Teachers should acknowledge the difficulty of the recovery process while still modeling healthy coping strategies. To help educators develop resilience strategies, the REMS TA Center offers an in-person [Training by Request](#) on this topic to schools and school districts for free.
9. **Teach administrators to recognize signs of staff trauma:** Consider when and how often teachers and administrators will be trained on PFA and the signs of trauma in the school community.
10. **Teach staff to recognize signs of student trauma:** Remind staff members that we all react a little differently to stressful events, and some coping strategies may be more helpful than others.