

# Supporting Hospital & Community Staff

---

## *A Guide to Psychological First Aid (PFA)*

---



# INTRODUCTION

---

The purpose of this guide is to support you in providing Psychological First Aid (PFA) to those impacted by the nature of their work during the pandemic, which may affect their wellbeing and mental health.

This guide can be used by anyone who wants to support another person through a physically and emotionally challenging time in their life that may feel like “the eye of the storm”. However, it may be most relevant to mental health professionals, such as:

- Psychologists
- Assistant Psychologists (APs)
- High-intensity therapists and psychotherapists
- Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners (PWPs)
- Counsellors

# CONTENTS

---

1

What is PFA?

2

Suitability of PFA

3

Structure & Content

4

Self Care

5

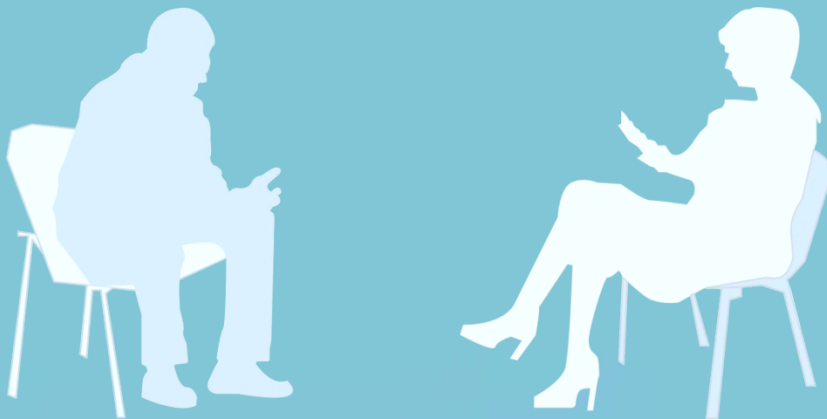
Helpful Resources

# WHAT IS PFA?

---

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-informed approach to supporting individuals affected during and after potentially traumatic events. This includes health and social care workers on the Covid-19 frontline in clinical (e.g. nurses) or non-clinical (e.g. admin) roles, as well as those who provide domestic services (e.g. cleaners).

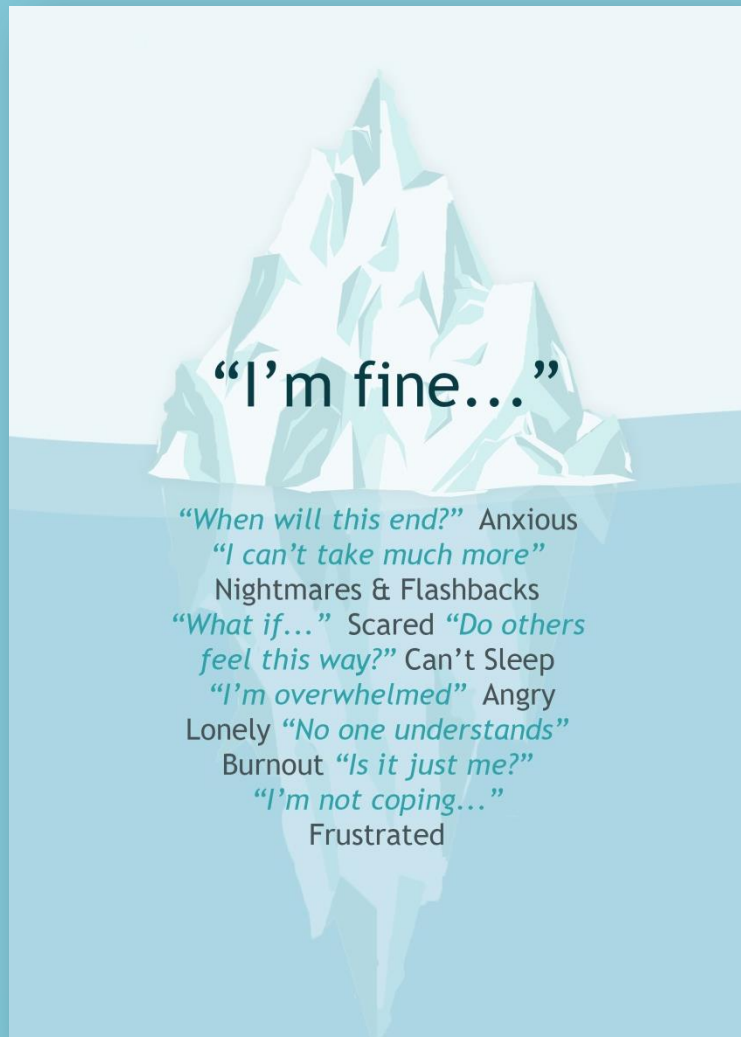
It aims to alleviate an individual's distress through offering a supportive and compassionate space to make sense of normal psychological reactions, whilst promoting self-care and coping.



# WHAT IS PFA?

---

Because there is often more to “*I am fine*”, PFA draws on the basics of listening and providing comfort but it can also be practical.



# WHAT IS PFA?

---

## What it IS:

- An approach that taps into pre-existing resilience, functioning and coping
- A flexible, often informal, conversation with another human being
- A form of support in face of a crisis or traumatic event

## What it ISN'T:

- A formal intervention or counselling
- Asking someone to analyse what happened (psychological debriefing)
- Something that everyone needs
- An approach only for professionals to use



# SUITABILITY OF PFA

Deciding if someone has a mental health difficulty or whether PFA is suitable over more formalised forms of support can be difficult - Consider...

## Duration

Have their reactions persisted beyond the traumatic event(s), has the event passed?

## Impairment of functioning & coping

Do they feel completely unable to cope or live their life as before?

## Pattern of reactions

Did they feel this way before the event? Did it make it worse?

## Severity of the reactions

Are the person's reactions severe?

## Symptoms

Does the person show symptoms of a mental health difficulty?

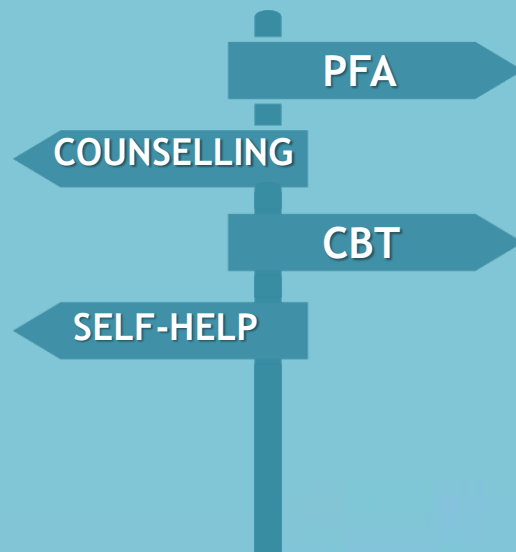
If 'Yes' to many of the above and their wellbeing 'DIPSS', the person may need formal support...

# SUITABILITY OF PFA

---

In the event that someone does meet the previous DIPSS criteria, consider referring the person to receive an assessment for formalised psychological support.

- You may wish to refer them to their local IAPT service: <http://tiny.cc/FindIAPTSERVICE>
- 'Wellbeing Hubs' are also available for many Trusts, which can signpost them accordingly





# SUITABILITY OF PFA

---



As many reactions will simply be “*normal reactions to abnormal circumstances*”, it is important to carefully consider the timing of psychological intervention.

Intervention too soon or when its not needed can interfere with the mind’s natural healing processes and inhibit someone’s pre-existing coping.

# STRUCTURE

---

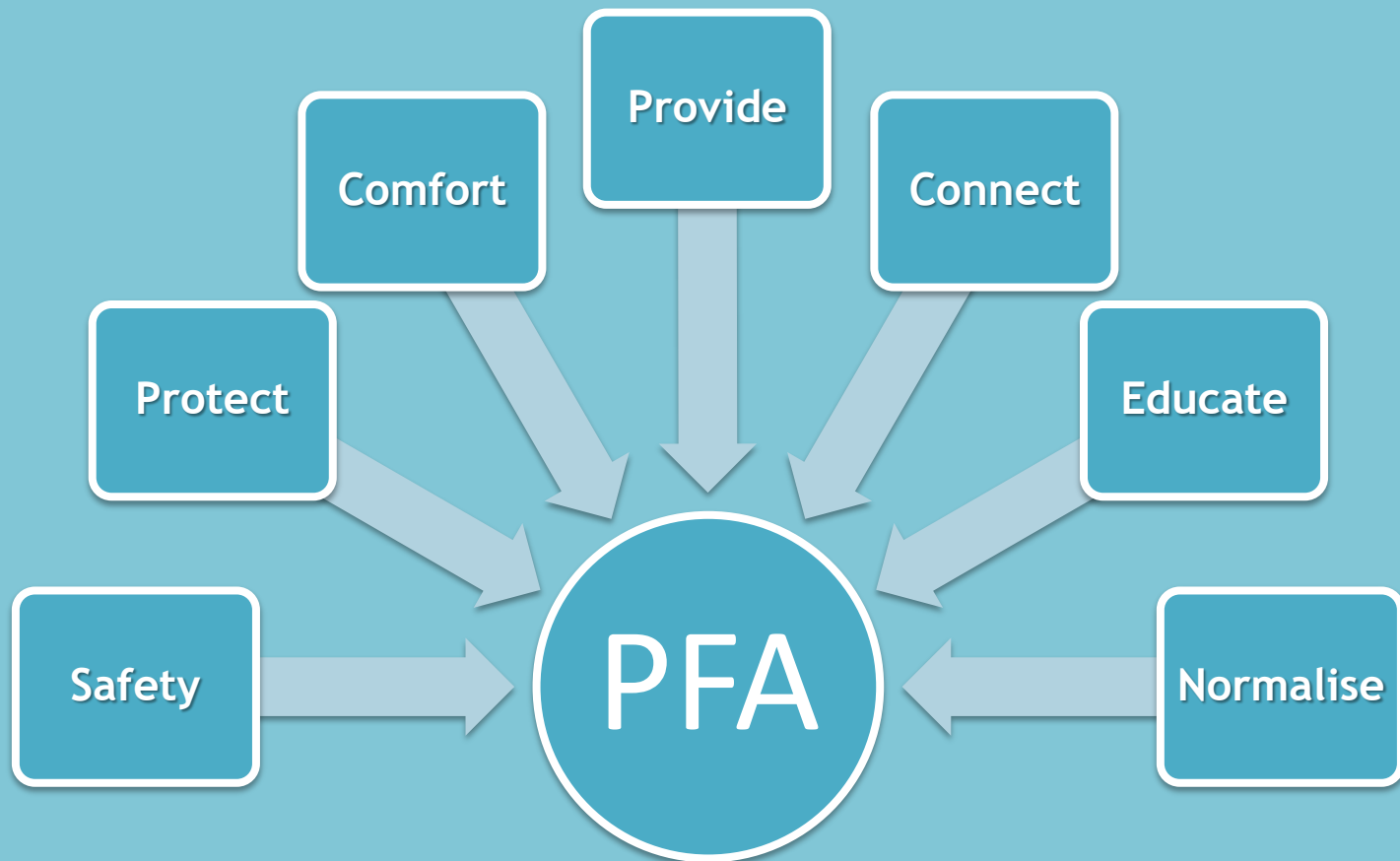
There is no expected structure when offering PFA; the key is to be flexible to the needs of the person receiving it.

- In-person or remotely
- A length that's acceptable to the person (30m - 1hr)
- When the person is on-site or at home
- Confidential
- One or more sessions
- Content informed by a PFA training package



# CONTENT

PFA sessions draw on the following elements. Not all are needed at once, rather a session may only focus on a few depending on the person's needs.



Taken from NHS Education for Scotland (NES; 2020)

# CONTENT

---

## SAFETY

- Does the person have immediate needs (e.g. PPE or risk assessments) to keep safe?
- Devise an action plan to address these needs
- Support them to implement the plan



## PROTECT

- Explore possible future risks to safety and support to mitigate
- Provide information about risks (e.g. Covid exposure)



# CONTENT

---

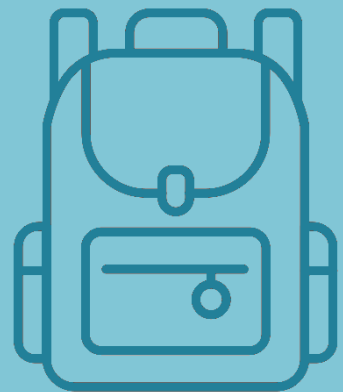
## COMFORT

- Listen attentively with compassion
- Don't offer judgment or interpretation
- Convey empathy verbally and non-verbally



## PROVIDE

- Provide information or signpost to address practical needs (e.g. employment support)
- Provide self-help strategies and tools to complement pre-existing coping



# CONTENT

---

## CONNECT

- Encourage the person to connect with their support networks and communities
- Support them in raising their thoughts, feelings or needs with colleagues and managers



## EDUCATE

- Use psycho-education to explain reactions - using metaphors can be helpful!
- Supplement with materials





# CONTENT

---

## NORMALISE

- Explain that many reactions are understandable, normal and expected
- Reassure them that others feel similar
- Instil hope that the distress will pass

Not everyone reacts in the same way - we all experience things differently given our contexts:

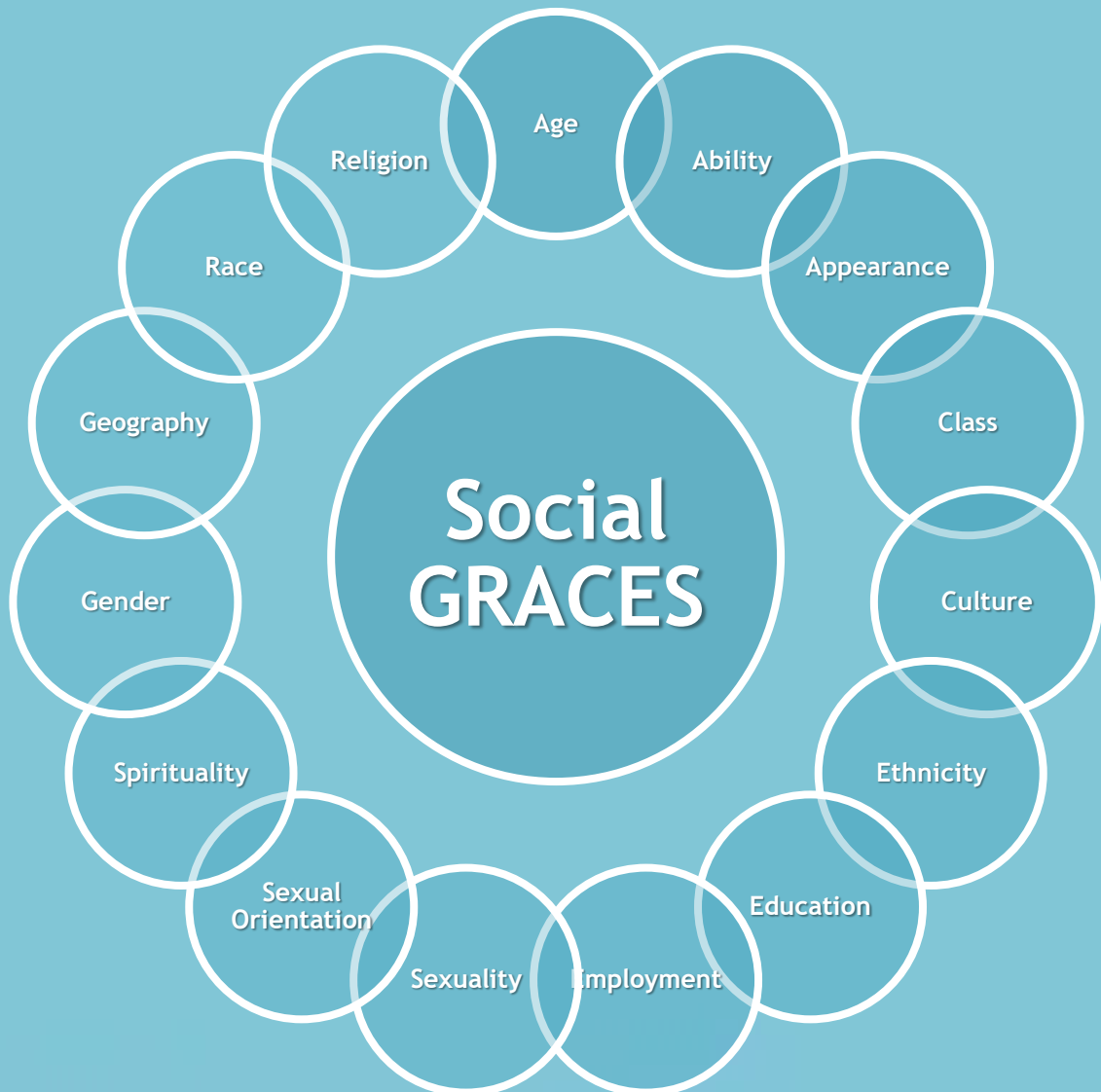
*“We are in the same storm, but different boats”*



# CONTENT

---

Hold in mind the many aspects of the person's identity you are supporting. These will shape their lives and experiences of the pandemic.



# CONTENT

---

WELLBEING PLAN: to further promote the person's wellbeing, an action plan can be put together, which can be reviewed at later sessions. It can follow an 'ABC' model...

1. Collate their early warning signs at work and at home (Awareness)
2. Construct a list of action points for them to implement with the aim of counteracting the early warning signs (Balance)
3. Prioritise social support (Connection)



# SELF CARE

---

## Remember to take care of yourself!

When supporting someone else with PFA it can be easy to overlook your own wellbeing. You may hear distressing stories or accounts of what someone has been going through and this may impact how you feel.

Be aware of how the content of PFA may apply to you, use supervision if you have it and prioritise self-care. You may also wish to try out a '*5-minute Me Space*' (see '*helpful resources*')...

*“You can’t pour from an empty cup”*

Take time to refill...



# HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Billings et al., (2020) [Supporting Hospital Staff During COVID-19: Early Interventions](#)
- Cole et al., (2020) [Adapting IAPT services to support frontline NHS staff during the Covid-19 pandemic: the Homerton Covid Psychological Support \(HCPS\) pathway](#)
- WHO (2011) [Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers](#)
- The Kings Fund (2020) [Responding to stress experienced by hospital staff working with Covid-19](#)
- Public Health England (2020) [COVID-19: Psychological First Aid](#)
- NHS Education for Scotland (2020) [Psychological First Aid Training](#)
- ‘5-Minute Me Space’:  
<https://people.nhs.uk/care-and-compassion/5-min-me-space/>

# HELPFUL RESOURCES

## TRAUMA SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE (TSQ; Brewin et al., 2002)

“Please consider the following reactions which sometimes occur after a traumatic event. This questionnaire is concerned with your personal reactions to the traumatic event which happened to you. Please indicate (Yes/No) whether or not you have experienced any of the following at least twice in the past week”

1. Upsetting thoughts or memories about the event that have come into your mind against your will
2. Upsetting dreams about the event
3. Acting or feeling as though the event were happening again
4. Feeling upset by reminders of the event
5. Bodily reactions (such as fast heartbeat, stomach churning)
6. Difficulty falling or staying asleep
7. Irritability or outbursts of anger
8. Difficulty concentrating
9. Heightened awareness of potential dangers to yourself and others
10. Feeling jumpy or being startled by something unexpected

**A total score of 6 or greater indicates possible PTSD**



# HELPFUL RESOURCES

## Wellbeing Plan Template:

### Early Warning signs:

Warning Level	Warning Signs		
<b>Red</b> (wellbeing at risk, take action)	Physical:	Social:	Psychological:
<b>Amber</b> (growing impact - time to act?)	Physical:	Social:	Psychological:
<b>Green</b> (no concerns)	Physical:	Social:	Psychological:

Wellbeing Plan: *To promote my wellbeing, I will do the following....*

	Physical	Social	Psychological
At Home			
At Work			

# TOP TIPS

Make sure to utilise supervision and peer support – it is important you have a space to debrief after delivering PFA sessions, especially if discussing emotive or challenging topics – Charlotte, PWP

Remember therapists can experience burnout and moral injury too, so be sure to utilise supervision and prioritise yourself – Nancy, PWP

Going 'back to basics' can go a long way when supporting someone – focus on being a compassionate person just supporting another human being – Poppy, Trainee Clinical Psychologist

PFA can build on someone's pre-existing coping by teaching a technique or two, serving as the 'icing on the cake' – Jo, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Trauma Expert

Work with people to respond to what they need in the moment. Help them to identify the different helpful responses they have to different warning levels, expect fluctuations and roll with it – Amber, CBT Therapist

Be well informed on the latest guidance and other local support services, so you are able to give accurate information and signpost – Charlie, Senior PWP



# AUTHORS

---

This guide was designed and written by Charlie Cole (Charles.Cole@nhs.net; @CharLewCole), Project Lead of the Homerton Hospital Staff Support Pathway, delivered by Talk Changes (Hackney & City IAPT).

The experts of the COVID Trauma Response Working Group were consulted during the guides development.

Content reflects that of the NHS Education for Scotland, Turas Psychological First Aid (PFA) Training Package (2020)

**Thanks for reading!**

**Please share as a resource.**

(editable versions made available by the author)