

Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Schools, Teachers, and Students

During the World-Wide Pandemic

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**NORTH AMERICAN CENTER™
FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT
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Background and Current Application

This Introduction to Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Schools: Listen Protect Connect/Model and Teach is a resource document that provides more background information on the development and use of the “Sample Questions for Each Step: Listen Protect Connect Model and Teach During the World-Wide Pandemic” However, this brief overview does not substitute for in-person training for the PFA LPC-Model and Teach. Information about PFA Training is available through NACTATR.

Historically, Psychological First Aid is a concept that can be traced to an article published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1954 which acknowledged the need for an acute intervention to alleviate human stress “of a severity and quality not generally encountered due to the ‘forces of nature or from enemy attack’.”

Since that time, many researchers, government and health organizations, including the National Institute of Mental Health, the Institute of Medicine, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services and Justice, have supported the idea that early, brief and focused intervention can reduce the social and emotional distress of children and adults after traumatic events by establishing feelings of physical and emotional safety.

Listen, Protect, Connect: An Evidence-Informed Model

In keeping with best practice guidelines, Psychological First Aid for Schools: Listen Protect Connect - Model and Teach is a model of immediate help focusing on support and assistance provided to students by adults who are employed by a school or school district, specifically, teachers, educational aides, administrators, and staff members.

PFA: LPC-Model and Teach was specifically designed as a five-step crisis response strategy based on communication skills that educators and school staff use every day. Although initially introduced in response to targeted school violence, such as school shootings and other acts of violence on a school campus, the goals of Psychological First Aid for Schools – Listen Protect Connect/Model and Teach have relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic which has seriously disrupted the daily lives over children and adults all over the world. The closure of schools, and businesses add to the health risks faced by all which contribute to the stresses that students and adults face under orders of physical distancing, stay at home directives or quarantine conditions. Given the high levels of internet and web connectivity for students, **being at home doesn’t have to mean being cut off from teachers, school support staff, classmates and friends.**

In an original *Helpful Hints article* published by the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center of the U.S. Department of Education, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 2008, Psychological First Aid for Educators and School Staff “Listen, Protect, Connect—Model & Teach” (LPC-Model and Teach) was introduced as a stress reduction, crisis response strategy. Authored by Drs. Marleen Wong, Merritt Schreiber and Robin Gurwitsch, the main goals of PFA are to help to fulfill the mission of education during times of crises, man-made and natural disasters:

- 1) To remove the social and emotional barriers to learning after a crisis
- 2) To keep students actively engaged in learning by reducing fears, stress and worry
- 3) To help students find new ways of coping and adapting to a 'new normal'

CORE ELEMENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA) FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS: LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT—MODEL & TEACH

PFA: LPC-Model and Teach is a five-step program that provides educators guidelines on how to speak with students who have experienced an emergency event or disaster that has disrupted the learning environment. Each step is formulated to help teachers reduce distress and facilitate student learning in the classroom on campus or online. The steps are based on a model of cognitive learning and behavior 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.

It is within this context that the “Sample Questions for Each Step: Listen Protect Connect Model and Teach During the World-Wide Pandemic” were developed

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. The teacher, administrator or school staff member can open the discussion by acknowledging what has happened and letting students know that it is okay to share their experiences.

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 even in the online learning environment 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 disruption to school and many other aspects of daily life. They can acknowledge the needs of students and teachers to 'get back to normal' and demonstrate a positive and optimistic approach to a new normal. 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 during and after the crisis. They can help educators and students become familiar with the range of normal reactions that can occur immediately after a traumatic event or disaster and discuss constructive ways of adapting and coping to new challenges and changes. The following are common reactions among children that may cause them new worries and distress. The child's age and developmental level are important factors to consider.

Emotional Reactions

- Increased worries or fears about the health and safety of self or others
- Worries or fears about separation and/or loss
- Worries or fears about reoccurrence of event
- Worries about ongoing situation
- Feelings of guilt or blame
- Feelings of helplessness

Behavioral Reactions

- Changes in school attendance or performance
- Decreased concentration
- Decreased attention
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in mood (swings)
- Increased irritability
- Increased anger outbursts or temper tantrums
- Increased withdrawal
- Regression in behavior

Cognitive Reactions

- Repeated questions about the event
- Repeated discussion or story-telling about event
- Repetitive play about the event
- Misunderstandings and misperceptions about the event
- Excessive interest in media coverage
- Trauma reminders (those things that are similar to sights, thoughts, sounds, tastes, smells, etc. that were present at the time of the traumatic event)
- Loss reminders (those things that serve to remind children about what and/or who they have lost because of the disaster or trauma)

Physiological Reactions

- Increased sensitivity to sound
- Increased startle response
- Increased somatic complaints including: headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, vague aches and pains

How to Implement PFA for Students and Teachers

PFA: LPC-Model and Teach is not intended as a single session in which the student simply recites their experiences, but an interactive process by which teachers and staff can identify potential psychological and emotional roadblocks to learning over time. Students may need to tell their stories at different times and in different settings (online or in person) during or after significant events that cause them stress and distress, remind them of loss, the trauma or the anniversary of a tragedy. It's important to keep in mind that the challenges can be different at different points in time. What causes a student distress immediately after a crisis may be different at different points in time over the course of weeks, months or years.

The same adult does not have to consistently be the individual who provides PFA but each phase and component and the overall process should be adhered to with fidelity.

If a student wishes to speak to different adults, he or she may do so. This is not a 'one and done' process. Truly working through or processing a disruptive or traumatic experience takes time, reflection and work.

Risk Factors That May Indicate the Need for a Counseling Referral

Psychological First Aid is effective for most students. It has been suggested that 75 to 85% of students are able to adapt to new challenges with early support from an important adult. However, if a student has any of the following experiences you may wish to consider referring him or her to your school psychologist, counselor or social worker or local community mental health agency.

- Loss of a family member, schoolmate or friend
- Fear for their lives, observing serious injury or the death of another person
- Getting sick or becoming hurt due to the event
- Home loss, family moves, changes in neighborhoods, changes in schools or loss of belongings
- Being unable to evacuate quickly or quarantine quickly enough
- Past traumatic experiences or losses
- Pet loss
- Past history of trauma, anxiety, depression or behavioral disorders coupled with any of the above

Should a teacher make a referral to a counselor or mental health professional, he or she can still utilize LPC—Model & Teach principles to provide support in school when the student experiences behavioral or emotional difficulties in the learning environment.

The timeline for recovery is not fixed and depends on many factors. It is normal for children and adults to experience heightened upset and distress for a few weeks immediately after a crisis occurs. However, if the child continues to have difficulty with eating, sleeping, regulating emotions or failing to adapt after six to eight weeks, a referral is indicated.

Portions of this document were excerpted from 2 publications:

1. Helpful Hints for School Emergency Management Psychological First Aid (PFA for Students and Teachers: Listen Protect Connect-Model and Teach (Wong, M., Schreiber, M., Gurwitch, R.,2008), https://rems.ed.gov/docs/HH_Vol3Issue3.pdf
2. **10 Tips for Teaching the Psychological First Aid Model** for K-12 Education Agencies (2019)s, Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center of the U.S. Department of Education
https://rems.ed.gov/Docs/PFA_10_Tips_508C.pdf

Listen

- Tell me how you have been affected by the stay at home orders during the Corona Virus?
- What's your schedule like from Monday through Friday?
- How do you spend your weekends?
- I am ready to listen when you are ready to share.

Protect

- Are you worried about your safety? Or the safety of others?
- What are you most worried about right now?



Connect

- Have you ever had to confront a situation like this when you couldn't go outside your home when you wanted to?
- What can your family members do to help?
- What can your friends do to help?
- What do you think you can do to make things better?
- What has been helpful to you in the past when you've faced a crisis?



Model

- Thank you for the courage you've shown and for sharing your concerns with me.
- Let's talk about some things you can do to re-connect with family and friends outside your home while you continue to protect yourself from this disease.
- Let's brainstorm some of the ways that other students and adults are coping

Teach

- What you experienced is very stressful. It's a health crisis that everyone across the world is facing. Sometimes people feel like they are 'going crazy' because they can't leave their homes, go to school or work or see friends. But during quarantine conditions when all family members have to keep at a distance from others, it's normal to have a difficult time creating a new schedule such as regular times for sleeping, eating or concentrating or even controlling emotions. Are you experiencing any of these common changes?
- Until the stay at home orders are ended and you can return to school, creating a new 'regular' routine is the best thing you can do. It will take extra effort and some self-discipline but it will pay off in relieving your stress.



Teach (*cont'd*)

For example, on 'school days':

1. Go to sleep and get up at the same time.
2. Get dressed, eat breakfast and brush your teeth as you would on a regular school day.
3. Attend your online classes on time or if you are being homeschooled, study and do homework from 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon and 1:00 P.M. to 2:30 P.M. Build in your nutrition break.
4. Stay off your phone and don't engage in social media during those hours.
5. Spend dinner time and television time with your family.
6. Eat healthy and exercise.



Ending PFA Statement

Just know that there are people here who care about you and who want to help. I want to support you any time you want to talk.

(provide information about official school online chat rooms, blogs, twitter accounts, counseling services, etc.,)

I really look forward to the time when we all return to school. Take good care of you and your family.

