



# Psychological First Aid (PFA)

## General Guidelines for Addressing Mental Health Needs in the School Environment

PFA is an evidence-informed approach for assisting children, adolescents, adults, and families in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, disaster, or terrorism. PFA is designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short and long-term adaptive functioning.

## Responding to Crisis Incidents

### 1 LISTEN to what they say and how they act.

- Address the feeling(s)/behavior(s) as soon as possible.
- If a student wants to talk, be prepared to listen and focus on what s/he says and how you can be of help.
- Observe nonverbal communication. Remember that student(s) may also show their feelings in nonverbal ways, such as increased behavioral problems or increased withdrawal.
- Express compassion and calmness in your statements as well as nonverbal behaviors.

### 2 PROTECT by maintaining structure, stability, and consistency.

- Maintain daily routines, activities, and structure with clear expectations and consistent rules.
- Provide supervision and consistency to encourage successful outcomes.
- Monitor conversations that students may engage in or hear.
- Give information that is accurate and age-appropriate.
- Keep the environment free of anything that could re-traumatize the student.
- Validate the student's life experience.
- Maintain confidentiality as appropriate.

### 3 CONNECT through interaction, activities and resources.

- "Check in" with student(s) on a regular basis.
- Become familiar with learning support staff at your school (e.g. Psychiatric Social Worker, PSA Counselor, School Psychologist,



Counselor, Nurse) and community health/mental health services. Make referrals to the appropriate resources who may offer support to student(s).

- Encourage interactions, activities, and team projects with friends and teachers.
- Keep communication open with others involved in the student(s) lives (e.g. parents, other teachers, coaches, etc.).
- *Note: Consult with DCFS if you suspect child abuse and/or neglect.*

### 4 MODEL calm and optimistic behavior.

- Model healthy responses by remaining calm, courteous, organized, and helpful.
- Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and reactions about the event. In the midst of a crisis, students are often watching for verbal and nonverbal cues by the adults they are with, which may influence how students cope and behave.
- Take constructive actions to assure safety.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, but demonstrate how people can come together to cope after such an event.
- Practice self-care.

### 5 TEACH about normal changes that can occur when traumatized.

- Students may have different reactions even to the same event.
- Encourage students to identify and use positive coping strategies to help them after the event.
- Help your students to problem solve to get through each day successfully.
- Help students set small "doable" goals and share in these achievements as "wins."
- *Note: With time and support, students generally do better. If they do not, they should be encouraged and taught to seek assistance from a parent/guardian or a school staff member.*