



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Person-side Manner: Stress First Aid Patient and Family Support

The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a self-care and social support model originally developed for those in high-risk occupations like military, fire and rescue, and law enforcement. It can also be applied to supporting patients and their families, because the treatment they receive from healthcare workers positively influences their experiences and increases their capacity to recover and move forward.

The SFA framework incorporates simple, supportive actions that can be used as needed with distressed or disoriented individuals and families. These should be integrated into your work in a natural, seamless way. While they may involve only a small amount of effort, these actions can make a huge difference in how readily the people you work with recover from stress. Equally important, providing a more compassionate and helpful level of care can make you feel better about the quality of service you provide.

SFA is based upon five essential principles that were derived from a review of more than two decades of research. These five principles are empirically linked to improved recovery across many settings. The five core actions of the SFA framework are based on these five essential principles: **Cover, Calm, Connect, Competence** and **Confidence**. The use of these core actions helps people deal with stress, crisis and loss.

The basic objectives of Stress First Aid are to:

- Establish a connection in a helpful and respectful manner.
- Restore and support a sense of safety.
- Calm and orient distressed individuals.
- Connect individuals as soon as possible to sources of social support.
- Help improve people's ability to address their most crucial needs and concerns.
- Help increase hope and confidence, and limit self-doubt and guilt.

The action you take depends on what is wrong and your assessment of how best to help. You are most likely already performing many of these actions in the course of your work. However, as you start to use SFA, you will find that you get a better sense of which core

actions are most needed in any given situation. Your actions will be guided by the information you collect, and through observation, conversation and experience.

These approaches should be:

- Used flexibly and naturally, wherever or whenever needed.
- Individualized to the needs of each person in the context of the situation—there are no one- size-fits-all solutions.
- Used in collaboration with others to create the most effective solutions.

The most basic principle in SFA is to treat people as you would want to be treated. But SFA also strives to treat them as they most need to be treated, even if it is different from the way you would want to be treated.

Each SFA action has three parts:

Approach: How you establish a partnership with the person through respect and compassion.

Information: What information to both give and collect, and how to manage the process.

Direction: How to direct a person’s actions in a way that supports the person and increases their ability to comply with your requests.

Keep in mind that the connection you make with the people you encounter in the course of your work is an essential part of how you can help them recover from the stress of what they have been through. You may not always remember all the SFA actions that might apply to any given situation. However, if you respectfully convey to people that they are what matters most in what you do, you will leave a positive impression and help them get through the difficulties they face.

A summary of *Stress First Aid* principles and actions is provided in the following table.

	APPROACH	INFORMATION	DIRECTION
COVER	Demonstrate respect Introduce yourself Ask for and use names whenever possible Convey that you are there to help their situation and to keep them safe	Ask about concerns Give simple, accurate information on rescue activities Reassurance of safety	Take immediate action to make them safe. Tell what to do rather than what not to do Protect from unnecessary exposure to distressing sensory input, media or onlookers

	APPROACH	INFORMATION	DIRECTION
CALM	<p>Keep a calm and focused demeanor</p> <p>Respect needs</p> <p>Reassure by authority and presence</p> <p>Show understanding</p> <p>Validate feelings and concerns where appropriate</p> <p>Expect and, when possible, accommodate strong emotional responses</p>	<p>Ask focused questions</p> <p>Identify and address immediate needs</p> <p>Watch for signs of being disorientated or feeling overwhelmed</p> <p>Collect information that can help identify needed resources</p> <p>Provide information about what you are doing and how it may help</p> <p>Give appropriate reassurance when you can</p> <p>Tailor your interactions to age, gender and culture as needed</p> <p>Give information to help individuals understand circumstances/reactions</p>	<p>Address basic needs first</p> <p>Emphasize the present, the practical, and the possible</p> <p>Help the person to identify and take meaningful action to help themselves</p> <p>Direct people to use simple, self-calming actions</p> <p>Use distraction when indicated</p> <p>Explain immediate need for your actions, if required</p> <p>Address immediate concerns as directly and as promptly as possible</p> <p>Get help from family and friends</p> <p>If dissociated or disoriented, help person focus on concrete surroundings</p>
CONNECT	<p>Make it a priority to connect people with trusted supports</p>	<p>Collect contact information</p> <p>Ask about people who can be supportive resources</p> <p>Ask about most trusted supports (including pets)</p>	<p>Foster connection with family and friends</p> <p>Encourage seeking support from those in similar situations</p>

	APPROACH	INFORMATION	DIRECTION
COMPETENCE	<p>Strive to help with immediate practical assistance whenever possible</p> <p>Get people connected to resources</p>	<p>Determine people’s needs, what your role is who can help</p> <p>Provide verbal and written information on resources and encourage their use</p>	<p>Provide items they need</p> <p>Give the person ideas of ways they can help</p> <p>Provide contact information for additional resources</p> <p>Make connections for specific health conditions (whether physical or mental)</p>
CONFIDENCE	<p>Keep a neutral or positive attitude</p> <p>Avoid judgment</p> <p>Praise strengths and positive actions taken</p>	<p>Clarify misunderstandings, rumors and distortions, where possible</p> <p>Reduce guilt about actions, where appropriate</p>	<p>Keep the focus on the present moment</p> <p>Put the person on task</p> <p>Provide positive reinforcement for task-related efforts</p>

Adapted from: Watson, P., Gist, R., Taylor, V. Evlander, E., Leto, F., Martin, R., Vaught, D., Nash, W.P., Westphal, R., & Litz, B. (2013). Stress First Aid for Firefighters and Emergency Services Personnel. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.