

Psychological First Aid

Learner Resource - Course Handbook



We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

DEECA is committed to genuinely partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.



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Contents

Introduction	2
Learning objectives	2
Content	2
Understanding Psychological First Aid (PFA)	2
Background to PFA	2
Benefits of PFA	2
What PFA isn't	3
PFA framework	3
PFA application	4
Activity	5
Stages in PFA framework	5
STAGE ONE - LOOK	5
Barriers to having conversations	6
STAGE TWO - LISTEN	6
Making the approach	6
Active listening	8
Rapport	8
Manage intense emotions	9
STAGE THREE - LINK	10
Contacts, support and referral options	10
Conversational tools – LINK	10
STAGE FOUR - FOLLOW-UP	11
Putting PFA into practice	11
Self-care	12
Key messages	12
NOTES:	13

Introduction

DEECA aims to enhance the skills and knowledge of managers and supervisors including crew leaders to support staff during times of need using the Psychological First Aid framework.

Learning objectives

At the end of the workshop you will be able to:

1. Describe what Psychological First Aid (PFA) is,
2. Apply PFA concepts to build confidence in having supportive conversations, and
3. Recognise PFA's relationship with options to promote and protect mental health and wellbeing.

Content

- PFA background, aims, what it is and isn't.
- PFA framework and actions.
- Conversational tools.
- Scenarios.
- How PFA fits with existing DEECA supports.

Understanding Psychological First Aid (PFA)

Psychological First Aid is the practice of practice of recognising and responding to people's needs by providing early, basic psychological support using a 4-step model.

PFA is evidence informed – it is based on what we know promotes coping and recovery.

It helps people to:

- address their immediate need and concerns,
- feel safe, connected to others and calm, and
- feel hopeful, and able to help themselves.



The term 'psychological' is used because it is an accepted term historically, and it focuses on emotional health and wellbeing.

Background to PFA

'Historically, post disaster approaches to mental health used clinical mental health skills, in emergency settings in which they were never intended or developed for us' A Guide to Psychological First Aid, International Red Cross (2018)

Research then challenged this approach:

- It could be ineffective (not make a difference).
- It could even be damaging (as it may re-traumatise people).
- Most people recover well with some basic support.

The focus has now shifted to PFA and emotional wellbeing. DEECA already uses PFA principles in its Peer Support Program training.

Benefits of PFA

The benefits lie in PFA's immediacy, practicality, it does not have to be conducted by a psychologist, and it is natural, evidence informed, and culturally sensitive.

It adds to and complements DEECA's existing capability.

PFA is recommended by many international and national expert groups and first responder agencies. It has been adapted for use with first responders, communities, parents, children, and military personnel.

Forward thinking organisations realise that an integrated approach to a safe and well workplace is good for

business. And this provides a mechanism for you to fulfil your management obligations to look after the wellbeing of your staff.

What PFA isn't

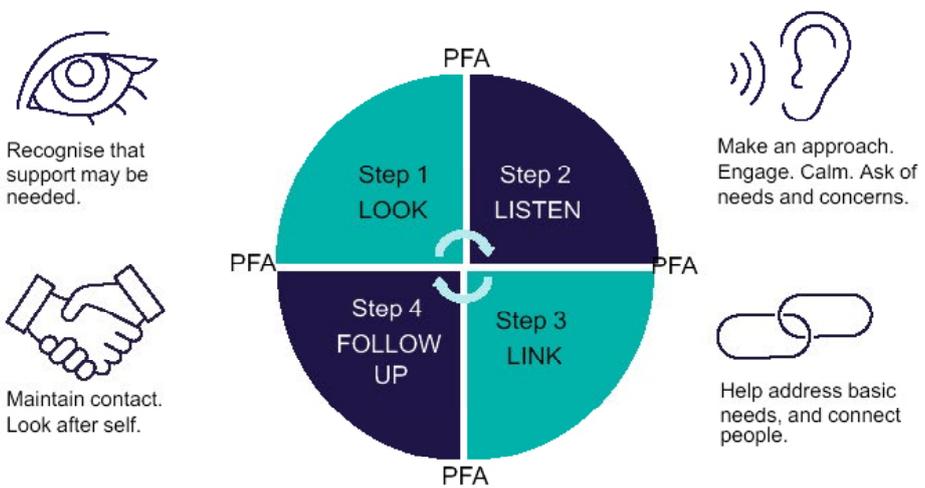
PFA is not something everyone will need, and it is not only provided by professionals. It is not labelling, diagnosing, treatment or counselling.

It is not a substitute for managerial responsibilities, or a replacement for existing resources and support options that DEECA has available.

PFA framework

The Psychological First Aid Framework is based on common sense principles. It has four stages:

1.	
2.	
3.	
4. FOLLOW	



By promoting natural recovery, PFA recognises that people do better in the long term if they:

- feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful, and
- are able to help themselves, and can access support (physical, emotional or social).

PFA guides you to implement **supportive activities** in a flexible way, tailoring them to people’s needs, concerns, and resources. **Boundaries** are important because they define the limits and responsibilities of the people you interact with in the workplace. PFA is based on a helping approach, not rescuing:

- Helpers encourage self-responsibility, and are empathic but able to recognise emotional boundaries, whereas
- Rescuers take away autonomy (so disempower) and can get enmeshed with the person/situation.

As PFA is instinctive and natural, it is highly likely you have used elements of PFA when you have been supporting someone at work. Think of times when you have supported someone. Write down things you have done in at least two of these four categories.

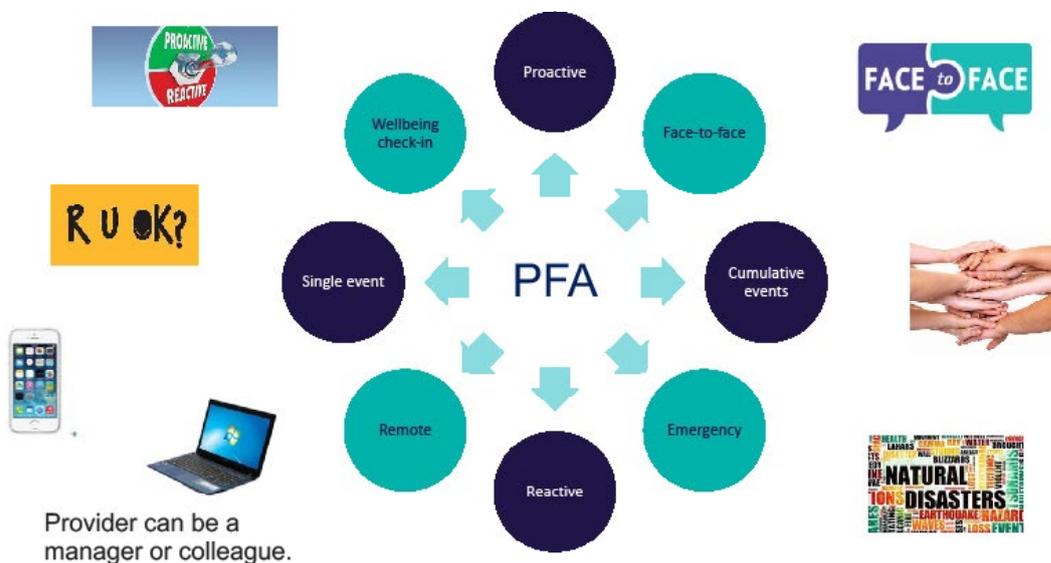
Aim	Action: What I did
Make things safe	
Calm and comfort	
Help with current needs	
Future focus – has some hope and is able to help self	

PFA application

There are lots of occasions when PFA may be useful.

Clearly, disasters and emergencies are events that can affect us in very significant and enduring ways, and this has been PFA’s traditional application. Yet people can be supported with a wide range of matters, and support can be offered in different ways: face-to-face, or through technology.

Anyone can potentially benefit from PFA as it is a means to show concern for people’s wellbeing.



Provider can be a manager or colleague.

Activity

With the above categories in mind, identify occasions when you have provided support to someone at work:

Stages in PFA framework

STAGE ONE - LOOK

LOOK

Recognise that support may be needed.
Consider who might feel isolated.
Show genuine, ongoing interest in people's wellbeing.
Pick your moment (your headspace; time; privacy)
Overcome barriers to initiating conversations.



As need and distress can be impossible to spot and can look different, and our perceptions can be wrong, we can't solely rely on trying to physically detect them.

Good practice means regularly checking in on people: e.g. asking 'How are you travelling?'

If PFA is in response to an emergency, disaster or critical event, check for:

- Safety (yours and theirs), and
- Urgent needs

We can be monitoring for indicators of changes in people's wellbeing, including our own.

The tell tale signs of someone in distress may be subtle or obvious.

It invariably involves CHANGE – a change from previous functioning in one or more of the following areas:

Physical

- Fatigue/sleep disturbance
- Headaches
- Nightmares
- Physical illness
- Weight gain/loss
- Stomach complaints

Behavioural

- Inertia
- Sloppiness/fussiness
- Use of drugs (caffeine, alcohol)
- Use of comfort food
- Withdrawal (family, friends, work)
- Avoidance

Mental

- Speed of calculation
- Memory capacity
- Ability to focus
- Intrusive thoughts
- Preoccupation/rumination

Emotional

- Moodiness
- Depression
- Irritability/frustration
- Loss of enjoyment/deadening of emotions
- Anxiety



Barriers to having conversations

Identify and overcome your barriers to having conversations.
For example:

- Lack of time, skill, confidence, or capacity ('full bucket')
- Previous bad experiences
- Fear, discomfort, feeling vulnerable
- Feels easier not to



But avoidance entails risks: missed opportunities to raise and address issues and provide. What are your barriers?

STAGE TWO - LISTEN

LISTEN

Connect. See if people need support.
Understand. Comfort.
Let them know you care.



- Approach people who may need support.
- Make a connection.
- Communicate interest and openness.
- Be a calming presence.
- Ask about needs and concerns.
- Give them space to share as much or as little as they want.
- Pay attention to cultural appropriateness.
- Acknowledge them and what they share with you.
- Resist jumping too quickly to problem-solving.

It is important to recognise that not everyone will want to accept an offer of support. Following up in certain circumstances and giving people choice is the key. Remember, this approach is about empowering not rescuing.

Making the approach

How you approach people to open a conversation is really important as it can set the tone.

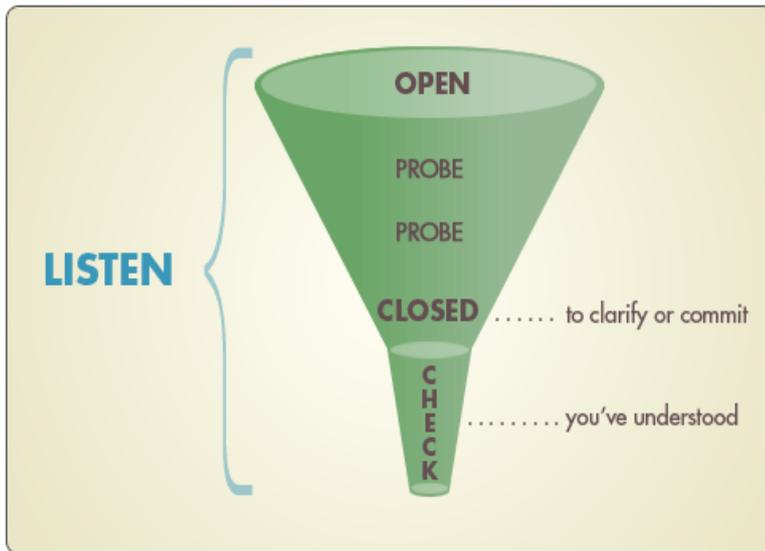
There is no absolute right or wrong way, but some approaches will be more effective than others.

Approaches to avoid:

Making the approach – the question funnel

Question funnels provide one option for opening and then progressing a conversation. At the mouth of the funnel, you begin with an 'open' question. This question is intended to give the widest possible scope for a response. A further question can be used to provide focus. A closed question may help to provide confirmation.

- 'How's your day gone so far?'
- 'What did you think of this morning's meeting?'
- 'I noticed you went very quiet at this point.'
- 'Is this something you'd like to talk about?'



Activity

Context: each person is at work. Beyond this, your group can choose more detail e.g. Do you know them/know them well; What their name is.

Then for each photo, suggest

1. The emotion or emotions the person may be experiencing
2. Your initial approach. Use a different approach for each photo.

1.



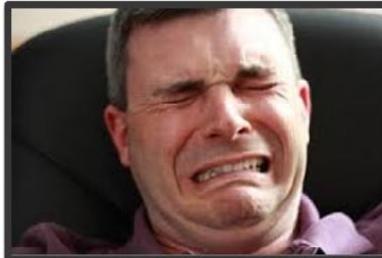
Emotion/s may be:

--

Your initial approach:

--

2.



Emotion/s may be:

--

Your initial approach:

--

3.



Emotion/s may be:

--

Your initial approach:

--



Emotion/s may be:
Your initial approach:



Emotion/s may be:
Your initial approach:



Emotion/s may be:
Your initial approach:

Active listening

At the core of PFA is active listening, the skill at the heart of most helping techniques, but also the first skill learned in communication and community engagement training programs. Active listening is a skill. Like any skill, it requires conscious consideration and practice.

With the vast amount of information we are exposed to on a daily basis, it's no wonder that we can fall into some bad listening habits such as:

- Premature evaluation (making pre-emptive judgments)
- Not seeking clarification when we're not sure we understand
- Only partially listening because we're distracted or preoccupied e.g. with what we want to say, or our own personal beliefs about what is being said

How I can improve my active listening:

Rapport

Building and maintaining rapport in relationships creates a solid foundation for PFA.

Examples of how to build rapport are:

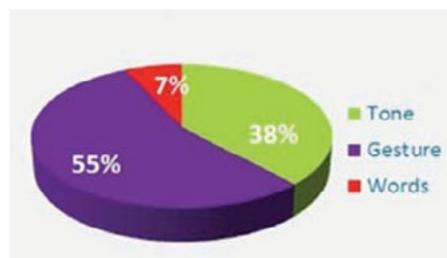


Listen	Pay attention to when people talk of their sporting interests, hobbies, volunteering, weekend activities and other things outside work. Listen attentively. People like to feel heard and understood.
Support	If someone tells you they are going through a tough time in their personal life, be available to listen and provide extra support at work where you can.
Communicate	If someone is away from work (e.g. working remotely, on extended leave or Workcover) keep in regular contact if appropriate, so they still feel part of the team.
Remember	Ask people about things they have previously mentioned e.g. a child's party; a sporting event. Remember, not everyone wants to revisit things they have told you, so follow their cues.
Accommodate	Accommodate each person's wellbeing and working style where possible. For example, factor in travel time for when you schedule meetings.

Source: VPSC Talking Performance Workbook

Tips for effective communication

- Being calm, patient, quiet and attentive, and aware **of body language and vocal tone**, as these comprise the elements of communication that have the most impact - much more than the content of the words.
- Acknowledging emotions, reactions and strengths.
- Acting with integrity - being honest in providing information, maintaining confidentiality, and remaining non-judgmental.
- Not pressuring or rushing a person, or telling them how they should feel. For example, it is not helpful - and may be harmful - to encourage people to talk about traumatic experiences. Provide people with support, but not in a way that pushes them to discuss more than they want.
- Not interrupting or switching attention to your own troubles.
- Not giving false promises or reassurance.



If PFA is in response to an emergency, disaster or critical event, don't use phrases like "Lucky it wasn't worse," or "At least it wasn't you." These will not be helpful statements. A more helpful thing to say is that you feel sorry about what's happened, and that you're there for them to try to help.

It is important to wait and avoid jumping in with solutions. In the helping mode, we tend to want to fix things and make them better. To be truly helpful, it is better to be in the moment with the person we are supporting. Continue to listen, tune into the emotions as well as the words. Making assumptions about what WE think might be helpful may prevent the person from working towards their own solution..

Manage intense emotions

Emotions such as anger, fear, worry or unresponsiveness can be a normal response to certain events including emergencies.

Tips are:

- Appear calm. Use deep, slow breathing, a lower tone of voice, and evenly paced speech.
- If people seem overwhelmed, use simple language and concrete questions as this can help to maintain focus, and explain why you're asking certain questions.
- Allow for silence, and don't push for information.
- Provide direct access to food and water (we don't think clearly if we're hungry or thirsty).
- If people appear emotionally overwhelmed, try to calm and orient them.

Conversational tools - LISTEN

"I've noticed that How are you getting on?"

"You don't seem yourself today/lately."

"How are you travelling at the moment?"

"I'm ready to listen if you'd like to talk."

"I'm here to help."

Avoid "Don't worry, it will be OK." "I know what you're going through."

"You should go to the EAP." "Look on the bright side."

STAGE THREE - LINK

LINK

Help address basic needs and connect people.



- Needs may be practical.
- Think about how you may be of best help to this person right now, and in the immediate future.
- Help people access information, coach them in solving problems and making decisions only when necessary.
- Encourage use of existing support networks and coping skills.
- Reassure them of organisational support.
- Recognise if someone might need more advanced support, and if you have a duty of care.

People tend to be in the best position to identify what type of support works best for them. They know what has worked in the past, and the resources that they may be able to access. Start where people are.t.

Conversational tools – LINK

“Have you talked to anyone about this?”

“Which aspect might be the best one to tackle first?”

“What do you think you could do next?”

“What have you found has helped in the past?”

“Who would you normally turn to for help?”

“Where do you think we can go from here?”

“Any ideas about what would be most helpful?”

“What would help take the pressure off?”

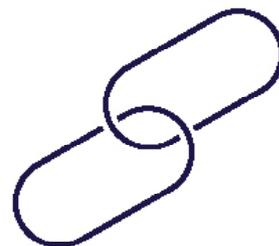
“I’m sorry you’re going through this. How can I help?”

“I’m wondering how I can be of best help to you today?”

Contacts, support and referral options

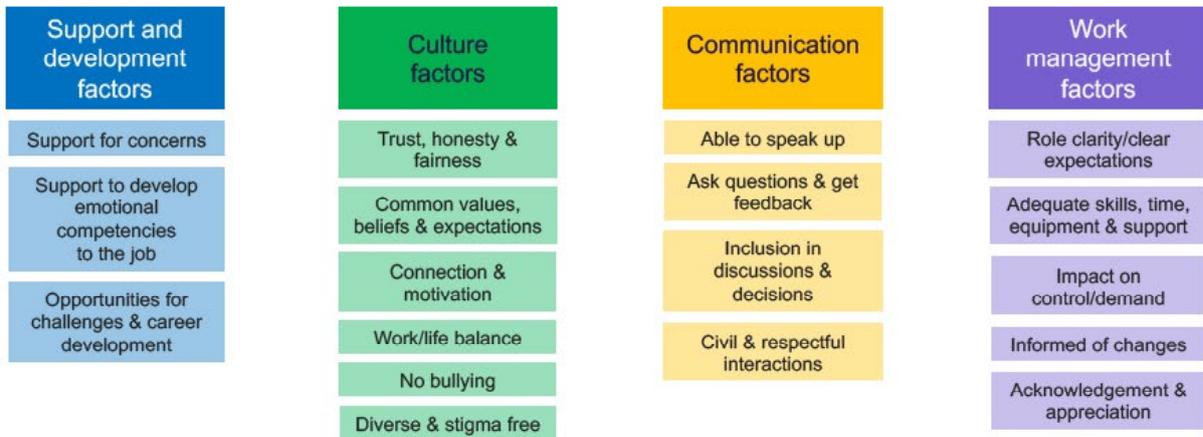
- Personal networks e.g. family, friends, GP, community supports
- Employee Assistance Program (seven streams)
- Peer Support Program
- Reach Out Program
- Safety & Wellbeing Branch
- Family Violence Contact Officers
- HR Business Partner
- Colleagues/crew members
- Workplace Conciliator
- External support services

Refer to lists of internal and external services to support mental health and wellbeing in PFA handbook.



DEECA's **Mental Health Work Factors Guideline** is a useful tool for prompting conversations about:

- which factors may be challenging people, and
- options that may help to strengthen and promote people's wellbeing.



STAGE FOUR - FOLLOW-UP

FOLLOW UP

- Continue to show interest in wellbeing.
- Respect privacy
- Repeat LOOK, LISTEN, LINK.
- Maintain contact and monitor for changes.



"How are you getting on with what we talked about last week?"

"I wanted to let you know I'm here."

Putting PFA into practice

Based on today's workshop, including the scenarios and skills practise, reflect on:

What I can start doing, or do more of:

What I can stop doing, or do less of:

Success measures. How I'll know I'm successfully putting PFA into practice:

Self-care

Self-care is critical for your own wellbeing. Remember to monitor for changes (see page 6).

- Identify your strengths, vulnerabilities and signs you may need support.
- Set realistic boundaries.
- Use coping techniques e.g. label emotions you are feeling in the moment; notice things you are grateful for; share your experiences and thoughts with someone you trust; ask 'Can I change this?'
- Regular exercise and a balanced diet.
- Maintain a routine.

Key messages

- Remember: LOOK, LISTEN, LINK, FOLLOW-UP.
- Talk often and openly. Use PFA proactively and intentionally
- Listening is one of the most important things you can do.
- Self-care. Make your own wellbeing a priority.

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