

# Psychological First Aid for SARS-Cov-2 Contact Tracers and Case Investigators

This guidance was adapted from materials developed by the World Health Organization's Psychological First Aid during Ebola virus disease outbreaks, developed in 2014<sup>i</sup>, PFA materials from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)<sup>ii</sup>, John Hopkins University<sup>iii</sup>, and the International Rescue Committee's Psychological First Aid for COVID-19 guidance document.

This document was reviewed by Sarah Clarke, MPH, Beth Farmer, LICSW, and Jess Dalpe, LMSW from the International Rescue Committee and William Stauffer MD, MSPH, FASTMH, Nathan S. Bertelsen, MD, MScPH, CTropMed, and Erin Mann, MPH from the University of Minnesota.

## What is Psychological First Aid (PFA)?

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-informed approach that was developed to help stabilize and mitigate psychological distress and facilitate coping and functioning in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or other tragic event. However, the basic tenets of PFA have wide applicability in all situations where someone may be distressed and overwhelmed. The material in this guidance adheres to the basic foundation of PFA while modifying PFA for the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in this guidance, the role of contact tracing and case investigation.

The job of a Contact Tracer & Case Investigator can be difficult. People may have a wide variety of reactions to a contact tracer, including anger, fear, sadness, confusion, and overwhelm. At the same time, contact tracers must be able to convey and receive a large amount of information, and discern when information needs to be acted on more immediately (like in the case of a medical emergency). To be able to do all of this – and to do it in a compassionate way – requires crisis communication skills. This is where PFA skills may be useful.

PFA is designed to reduce initial distress and to foster coping and adaptive functioning in someone recently impacted by a crisis or overwhelming event. PFA can be helpful for Contact Tracers & Case Investigators because it can assist people who are overwhelmed return to a level of calm, thus allowing them to better process and retain information, make decisions, and take initial next steps.

PFA has been recommended by many expert groups including the World Health Organization<sup>iv</sup>, Center for Disease Control<sup>v</sup>, American Red Cross<sup>vi</sup>, National Child Traumatic Stress Network<sup>vii</sup>, SAMHSA<sup>viii</sup>, and the American Psychological Association<sup>ix</sup> and reflects emerging consensus on how to support people in the immediate aftermath of extremely stressful or crisis events.

### What is the Difference between Stress and Distress?

Stress is the body's adaptive response to frustrating, worrisome, uncertain, exciting, or difficult situations. Stress can be related to "good" (e.g., new job, wedding, etc.) or "bad" (e.g., losing a job, divorce, etc.) events. Stress causes a heightened physiological reaction that, over time, can have a cumulative toll on mental and physical health.

Distress is different. Distress is when the amount of stress exceeds a person's ability to manage it. Distress often causes a person to feel overwhelmed, makes it harder to retain information and make decisions, and impairs short-term functioning.

Contact tracers and case investigators may be interacting with a high number of people who are distressed.

PFA is...	PFA is NOT...
Something that anyone can do with training	Something that only professionals can do
Supportive and practical	Counseling or therapy
Useful in assessing the immediate concerns and needs of the impacted individual	Probing people's thoughts or feelings
Listening to people so they feel heard and understood	Telling people what to do
Giving people enough time and compassionate support to feel calmer so they can better receive information and make decisions that are best for them	A series of steps or techniques that get to a pre-determined outcome
Helping people connect to information, services, and supports	Having all the answers to questions or being able to provide all the things someone needs

### Why PFA?

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (hereafter referred to as the 'pandemic') is having numerous negative impacts on people, families, and communities. Because of the pandemic and related social distancing measures, more people are isolated and their normal social support systems and interactions have been interrupted or are smaller. Many people have also seen their economic conditions worsen and are taking on additional responsibilities at home due to school closures. In addition, evolving public information and instruction and concurrent disinformation efforts have left some people uncertain as to what to believe or distrusting of accurate information.

*"I think the worst for me is when I call and the person I am calling about is really sick or even passed away. I feel terrible and I don't always know what to do or say."*

Within this context, Contact Tracers & Case Investigators may be the first person to tell someone that they have been infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, or in some cases, reach someone whose family or friend recently died from the virus. They may be asking people to do things like stay home from work, prompting people's worry about how they will follow guidelines and pay for basic and critical needs like food and housing. Contact Tracers and Case Investigators may be talking to people about quarantining

when their housing environment or caregiving responsibilities make that difficult or impossible. They may speak with people who are worried that they have exposed an elderly or medically fragile loved one, or even people who don't believe that the pandemic is real.

The intersection of these conditions and circumstances makes it more likely that Contact Tracers & Case Investigators will interact with people who may feel, or display, significant or intense emotion, including but not limited to anger, fear, despair, confusion, anxiety, sadness, and frustration. These reactions and responses may range from mild to more extreme.

When someone experiences a highly stressful event, they have an involuntary and automatic physiological response to what it is a real or perceived "threat/danger". Often called the "fight or flight" response, certain parts of the brain send distress signals to the rest of the body. Consequently, people's pulse rate and blood pressure go up, their muscles tighten, and their breathing becomes more rapid. During this "fight or flight" response, the brain is primarily focused on short-term survival - not on recall, retention of information, or making reasoned decisions or choices.

Psychological First Aid promotes short- and long-term resilience in these circumstances by having helpers recognize and respond to this stress response in ways that are field-tested and consistent with the research evidence on trauma risk and resilience.<sup>x</sup> PFA is designed to be flexible and responsive to what an individual expresses or needs; therefore, it is able to be used across the lifespan, in a variety of settings, and with diverse cultures.

It is important to note that PFA does not assume that having a stress-response, being distressed, or even experiencing trauma will lead to a mental health condition. Instead, it recognizes that brain and body will experience a 'normal' reaction to what is an 'abnormal' situation, and that people experiencing this reaction may benefit from a more intentional approach at engagement.

- **Who can benefit from PFA?** Anyone who is experiencing distress.
- **When should PFA be provided?** When interacting with a person who is showing signs of emotional distress, immediately after an adverse event (i.e., receiving news of a SARS-CoV-2 infection or exposure).
- **Where should PFA be provided?** Anywhere that is safe and that ideally has privacy.
- **Who can provide PFA?** Anyone who is trained to do so.

## Basic Principles of PFA

There are 5 basic principles that Contact Tracers and Case Investigators can promote through PFA:

1. **Calmness**- Learning you have SARS-CoV-2 or that you may have been exposed to the virus, can cause fear, distress, anger, and anxiety. Contact Tracers & Case Investigators promote a return to calm by behaving in a calm manner, allowing people to express emotion, and providing compassionate response.
2. **Safety**- Individuals may be concerned about their own health and safety and the health and safety of their loved ones. Contact Tracers and Case Investigators can promote a sense of safety by providing accurate information, answering question, and/or connecting people to resources and services where possible and appropriate.
3. **Connectedness**- Isolation, quarantine and general disruptions of normal activities often mean separation from loved ones, community members, and the general sense of connectedness that people share with one another. Exploring options of continued connection (e.g., reaching out via phone to a friend) can reduce a sense of isolation even when physical distance is necessary.
4. **Hope**- During times of fear or uncertainty, people may feel overwhelmed or hopeless. An important part of managing that feeling of overwhelm and distress is through hope. Simply by being present, listening, and offering practical supports where possible, Contact Tracers & Case Investigators lay a foundation for hope.
5. **Self & community efficacy**- Learning one has been infected with or exposed to SARS-CoV-2 can leave people feeling vulnerable, confused and uncertain. It is important for Contact Tracers & Case Investigators to help people connect to their own resiliency and strength, as well as family and community resources that are available.

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*“Sometimes people ask me for things that they need but that I don’t have any power to give them, like rent. When I don’t have the answer for them, they get really angry or start crying. I just don’t know how to respond.”*

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## PFA Core Actions: Prepare, Engage, Listen and Link

PFA consists of four types of actions, which historically have included Prepare, Look, Listen and Link. Because of the nature of the Pandemic there may not be an opportunity for Contact Tracers and Case Investigators to “Look” or observe face-to-face. For this reason, “Look” has been changed to “Engage” to cover the ways in which Contact Tracers and Case Investigators most often connect with people.

Prepare	Engage	Listen	Link
<p><b>Plan</b> for how you will engage with people, including what information, resources, and supports might be available.</p>	<p><b>Contact:</b> Think about how you will initiate contact, or respond to contact, in a way that helps build trust and rapport.</p> <p><b>Information Gathering:</b> In addition to the questions you will <u>need</u> to ask as a Contact Tracer &amp; Case Investigator, determine what questions you might <u>want to ask</u> that are <i>non-intrusive, compassionate, and helpful</i> to identify needs and concerns or gather additional information.</p>	<p><b>Calm and Stabilize:</b> Utilize listening skills to calm and orient people who may be overwhelmed, upset or fearful.</p> <p><b>Safety:</b> Pay attention to immediate and ongoing safety issues, including issues that may point to a medical emergency.</p>	<p><b>Social Supports:</b> Encourage brief or ongoing contacts with primary support persons and other sources of support, including family members, friends, and community helping resources, even if these need to be done remotely.</p> <p><b>Information and Services:</b> Provide accurate information on SARS-CoV-2 and available services needed at this time or in the future.</p> <p><b>Coping Strategies:</b> Help people identify coping skills and/or strategies to reduce distress and promote adaptive functioning.</p>

## Prepare

### Plan

Because most Contact Tracers & Case Investigators will be working remotely, it is important to have a plan for how to build rapport and trust from a distance. Important considerations include:

- Think about how you will introduce yourself, your role, and the purpose of your call. Make sure that you use simple language and explain what terms like 'Contact Tracing' and 'Case Investigation' mean.
- Ask if the person you are speaking with is in a private place where that they can talk freely. If not, give them time to move to that place if possible. If your protocol allows it and the person is at work, in a public place, or clearly distracted, ask if they would like to reschedule the conversation for a better time.
- Emphasize to people that you want them to have all the information they need for their health and safety and the health and safety of their loved ones.
- If your protocol allows it, ask the person you are speaking with if they want others present during the call. This can be especially important for young adults, elders, or non-English speakers. You can also ask if they have a pen and paper to record information, or if on a cell phone, have a way to record the call so they can refer to important information later.
- If the person does not speak English, make sure that you have their correct language and dialect. [For example, people from Iraq and Sudan will have different ways of speaking the Arabic language.] Ideally, have the interpreter know how to introduce you and the purpose of the call before connecting. This will help prevent the person from hanging up if the conversation begins in English. [Learn more through NRC-RIM's e-learning module "Working with Interpreters during Case Investigation and Contact Tracing" at <https://nrcrim.umn.edu/training/demand-training>]

Following quarantining guidelines may have negative impacts on people's ability to meet their basic needs or care for family members. It will be easier for you to gather information and for people to receive and process that information, if they know that there are possible supports available. Ideally your agency has partnerships and referral pathways in place. If not, you may want to work with your agency to have a list of resources and supports. It is important to note that some local jurisdictions have expanded access to supports to people regardless of immigration status.

Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs) and religious institutions across the United States have been an invaluable resource in providing supports such as food delivery that respects culture or religion, connection to others who speak the same language, access to important religious practices remotely, and even things like burial repatriation after a COVID-19 death.

Having a list of Community Based Service Organizations (CBOs), or organizations that provide social support services, can be also be helpful. There are also Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs), which serve and support people from particular countries or who belong to certain ethnicities. ECBOs can be exceptionally helpful when people need support and services in a particular language or in a way that understands and honors their culture. Faith based institutions such as churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, and faith-based charities, may also be a source of resources, support, and connection.

For people who are very distressed or who may be in unsafe situations, you will also want to have information about:

- The local Crisis Hotline
- Domestic Violence hotlines
- Other Helplines, such as WARM lines (for emotional support), 2-1-1 (for resource and referral support), etc.

Myths and rumors often arise during disease outbreaks. These myths and rumors, may blame certain people for the disease, lead to people trying fake, harmful treatments that can result in unnecessary illness and even deaths, or cause people to disbelieve a disease or diagnosis. Try to be aware of the more common myths and rumors so that you are prepared to respond with reliable and accurate information.



## Prepare Yourself

Contact tracing and case investigation is difficult and can be emotionally draining.

Contact Tracers & Case Investigators are often breaking bad news to people and then interacting with them while they respond. Because people are unique, their response may vary widely. Contact Tracers & Case Investigators may go from one call where a family member has passed away to another call where someone does not believe the virus is real to another call where a person is challenged with following guidelines because they might lose their job.

In addition, Contact Tracers & Case Investigators may be asked to solve numerous problems that they are not capable of solving, but feel responsible for solving. It is helpful if Contact Tracers & Case Investigators have a routine to prepare to make calls so that they can stay calm and resilient. Taking deep breaths before a call, stretching, getting comfortable, and even looking at a particular saying or quote that is meaningful to you can be helpful. It can also be helpful to remind yourself of the value in your work and the limitations of your role. Consider putting a Sticky Note next to your phone or computer with a meaningful reminder that gets to the heart of your values or meaning in the role. For example, "Even if I can't help people with everything they need, I can always treat them with dignity and respect while giving them important information."

Make sure to drink enough water, eat regularly and take breaks as needed between calls.

Have a plan for what to do when calls are particularly difficult. Think about who in your agency can help you process those calls. If possible, schedule regular time with colleagues who are doing the same type of work to discuss strategies and challenges, and also to just be around people who understand the particular difficulty of your role.

Think about the things that help you cope or that sustain you. This could be singing, dancing, mindfulness, prayer, meditation, or talking to a particularly supportive loved one. This will differ from person to person. Schedule these things into your day or create reminders for yourself to do these things. If you are feeling particularly fatigued, sad, or frustrated, it is likely you will not want to do these things. Try and make yourself do them anyway, as they will help with your resilience.

Lastly, think about when you know you might need to reach out for more help or support. Are there particular warning signs or "red flags" for you that the work is affecting your health and well-being or

Carlos notices that one of the hardest things in his job is when he talks to someone who doesn't take the virus seriously or who says they don't believe that it is real. During those moments, he can feel himself start to lose patience and empathy and worries that this might result in missed opportunities to share information. Carlos puts a sticky note by his computer that says, "Your job is not to change minds but to give information." He puts this next to one of his favorite pictures of his youngest child. Carlos makes a mental note that when he encounters these situations in the future, he will look at his note and the picture of his daughter as a prompt to stay calm and compassionate.

affecting your relationships? Are you finding yourself consistently less calm, understanding or patient with people? Think about what this looks like for you and think about what would be best to do in response. For example, Fatima knows that one of her warning signs is not being able to sleep. She makes a mental note for herself that if she cannot sleep for three days in a row that this is a signal, she should talk to her supervisor about taking time off.

## TIP Sheet

*Use this Tip Sheet as a guide to explore where you can refer people for these commonly needed resources. In a separate document, catalogue your findings for use during contact tracing and case investigation calls.*

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Low or no-cost medical care (often provided by Federally Qualified Health Clinics or FQHCs) | <input type="checkbox"/> Housing or rental assistance   | <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency financial assistance  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rent or Utility assistance  | <input type="checkbox"/> Food Assistance/Food banks   | <input type="checkbox"/> Employment support  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nearest public or charity hospital  | <input type="checkbox"/> ECBOs or Mutual Assistance Associations (e.g., Vietnamese Friendship Association or Ethiopian Community Coalition) | <input type="checkbox"/> Local faith-based agencies (e.g., Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services, Muslim Housing, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crisis Hotline  | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation assistance  | <input type="checkbox"/> WARM line (for behavioral health support)   |

List other resources you might need here:

It is also helpful to be aware of any state and local efforts that address:

- Unemployment insurance
- Eviction moratoriums
- Moratoriums on utility shut offs
- Housing for people who need to isolate or quarantine
- Educational supports for families with young children

## Engage

Agencies may have pre-determined scripts for their contact tracing and case investigation efforts. As you look at the material below, be sure to adapt it to fit your agency's approach.

### Initial Contact

Be sure to introduce yourself and your agency. Make sure you explain the purpose of your call and also center that purpose in the health and safety of the person and their loved ones. For example, "Hi. My name is Beatrice, and I am calling from the Department of Health. I am calling today because you recently tested positive for COVID-19. I know this may be a difficult time, but I am calling today to give you important information to help you and your loved ones stay safe and healthy."

### Anticipatory Guidance

Another way to create a sense of trust and rapport with people, while simultaneously decreasing their stress, is to provide something called Anticipatory Guidance. Anticipatory Guidance helps people know what to expect next, thereby decreasing a sense of uncertainty. Contact Tracers & Case Investigators can provide Anticipatory Guidance by letting people know: 1) the purpose of the call, 2) how long the call will be, and 3) the subjects covered in the call.

For example, "Today I will be giving you important information about COVID-19 so that you can stay healthy, reach out for medical care if you need it, or connect to other resources and supports. Later in the call I will be asking some questions so we can make sure your loved ones can stay safe. You will have an opportunity to ask me questions as well. You don't have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. The entire call will take about 'x' amount of time."

### TIP

Take the script provided by your agency and look at places where you can incorporate some of this language. Write in detail what you want to say and where in the flow of the script you want to say it. Even if you do not say it word-for-word, the process of writing it will help you more easily incorporate the language into your calls.

### Confidentiality

People may be worried about whom you will share information with for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to stigma, immigration status, fears of losing employment, perceived discrimination, and more. Be sure to frontload your conversation with discussions of confidentiality. Explain what you will do with the information you gather, with whom you will share it, and with whom you will not share it. For example, "Before we begin today, I want you to know how important your privacy is to us. The information you share with me will only be shared with 'x' so that they can 'x'. It will not be shared with employers, other government officials, your

neighbors, or anyone else. Do you have any questions about this?"

## Other Ways to Build Trust and Rapport

Other ways to build trust and rapport are to create an authentic human connection. This means trying to convey your care and interest in a short amount of time. Some strategies that can be helpful in achieving this are:

- Thank them for taking your call.
- Start off with a more formal name like Ms., Mrs. or Mr. as a sign of respect but ask what they preferred to be called and then utilize that name throughout the conversation.
- Ask the person if you are pronouncing their name correctly.
- Encourage the person to stop you if they don't understand something, to ask questions, or to ask for clarifications.
- Ask if it is OK to proceed.
- Speak slowly, calmly and clearly.
- While listening, let people know you are there by utilizing words like, "Uh huh" and "OK".

## Interpretation

When reaching out to individuals with whom the Contact Tracer or Case Investigator does not share a language, engaging interpreters will be necessary. In the best of circumstances, working with interpreters can be challenging. Remote contact with individuals adds another layer of challenge. In addition to general best practices for [interpretation](#)<sup>1</sup>, in the context of remote PFA during COVID-19 response, it may be helpful to spend a few minutes on the phone with the interpreter before calling the person to:

- Explain the purpose of the call and the general information that will be shared
- Let them know of any specific terms or phrases that are important (some terms do not always have a comparable direct translation in some languages)
- Encourage the interpreter to stop the conversation to ask you for clarification if there's anything they don't understand

Ideally, agencies will have a reliable set of interpreters that they utilize. If this is the case, having an orientation to contact tracing and case investigation, and giving interpreters a sample script and [glossary](#) is advised.

Some other important considerations for remote interviewing with interpreters:

- **Time** – Conducting an interview remotely with an interpreter takes more time. Make sure you have allowed enough time for interpretation.
- **Pacing** – It is harder for interpreters to interpret large chunks of information at a time. Stop after each sentence to minimize confusion and to wait for interpretation to be rendered.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://healtorture.org/sites/healtorture.org/files/Interpreter\\_Guidelines\\_0.pdf](https://healtorture.org/sites/healtorture.org/files/Interpreter_Guidelines_0.pdf)

- **Trust** – People may be worried that the interpreter knows people in the same community and will “spread their information”. Therefore, be sure to include the interpreter in the description of confidentiality. For example, “Before we get started today, I want you to know that the only people who will have access to the information we talk about today is ‘x’ and ‘x’. This information will not be shared by us with your employer, your family, or anyone else. As part of my employment and as part of the law, I cannot break this privacy. This is also true for the interpreter with us today. He/she is also required to keep your privacy.”
- **Misunderstanding** – Remote environments and cross-cultural contexts can contribute to more frequent misunderstandings. Before asking any questions, tell the person that you want them to stop you if they have a question, don’t know what a word or term means, or if they are not sure they understand something. For example, “We will be talking about a lot of things today and it is important that you feel you understanding everything I am saying. Feel free to ask any questions you may have. Also, let me know if you don’t understand something I am saying.” Pause frequently throughout the interview to ask things like, “Do you have any questions?” or “Is there anything you want to better understand or that you are unsure about?”

Even though “Listen” is covered in the next step, it is important to note that Listening is a critical skill throughout all of PFA. Be sure to allow space and time for listening during engagement. After introducing yourself and before launching into further explanations or questions, pause and give the person on the other end time to respond.

Farhiya has called numerous people lately that are reluctant to give her information. She suspects that this may be due to their immigration status. Farhiya spends some time thinking about how to address these fears in her call script. Farhiya develops ways she can modify the script to address these fears and has a few colleagues read her changes and provide feedback. Ultimately, Farhiya modifies her script so that after introducing the concept of confidentiality, she says, “This means that I cannot share your name or information with employers, law enforcement, immigration, or anyone else.”

## Listen

As stated in the “Engage” section, listening occurs throughout PFA and is one of the most important skills a Contract Tracer & Case Investigator can have. Listening:

- Tells people that they are valuable and that they matter
- Provides a space for people to express their emotions, which often helps people feel calmer
- Assists Contact Tracers & Case Investigators in discerning urgent needs and concerns
- Helps build trust and rapport which can assist Contact Tracers & Case Investigators in encouraging people to engage in behavior and activities that may be needed to maintain safety
- Offers opportunities for comfort and connection

### Calm and Stabilize

Contract Tracers & Case Investigators should be prepared that their call may result in emotional reactions, including anxiety, fear, feeling overwhelmed, uncertainty, and much more. Sometimes people need to express themselves and release their emotions before processing information, answering questions, or having a more logic-based discussion. People’s emotional expression can also provide insight into their current state and their most pressing concerns.

Listening promotes calmness and can help stabilize people when they are distressed or overwhelmed.

Common listening techniques that helpers can use include:

- **Speak calmly, slowly and in a sensitive manner.** Remember that as a Contract Tracer & Case Investigator you can promote a sense of calm and stability by using a calm tone of voice, maintaining a comfortably slow pace of conversation, and using active listening techniques.
- **Silence.** Most Contract Tracers & Case Investigators want to be helpful, but may make the mistake of trying to move to solutions too quickly. Wait for longer pauses to let you know that the person is done before responding. Given that much of this work may be done remotely during a pandemic and that people may not have the opportunity see each other and observe non-verbal cues, saying things like, “uh huh,” “hmmmmm,” “OK,” can let people know that you are still there without interrupting their expression.
- **Paraphrase.** Using paraphrases is one of the most effective active listening techniques available and lets the other person know they have been heard while also allowing Contract Tracers & Case Investigators to verify information. Paraphrasing is essentially taking what someone else says, turning it into your own words and reflecting it back to them.

### REMEMBER

PFA is not counseling or therapy. Contract Tracers & Case Investigators do not need to counsel people. At the same time, they can give people the opportunity to express themselves while providing active listening, validation and reassurance.

- **Validate.** Where possible affirm that people's emotions, concerns and feeling are normal. This helps them feel less alone and out-of-control. Some helpful validation responses might include things like, *"Given what is going on, that sounds like a normal response,"* or *"I think anyone would be having a hard time right now."*

## Safety

Contract Tracers & Case Investigators should pay attention to and listen for any signs of immediate and ongoing safety issues during their conversations. This includes any immediate medical concerns, access to urgent basic needs such as food and shelter, people who may be active experiencing violence and/or have significant mental health needs.

It is not always easy to identify a safety concern based on a remark or a single sentence. Therefore, you want to be able to follow-up to anything that indicates issues of concern with gently probing questions that help you identify if there is a safety concern and what kind of concern it is so that you can take the next most appropriate steps. Gently probing questions include things like, *Can you tell me more about...? Can you describe...? Would you explain to me more about...?*

Contact Tracers & Case Investigators should have a plan to respond to serious issues of concern.



## Case Example

Oksana has just explained to Mike, who is SARS-CoV-2 positive, about quarantining guidelines when he becomes suddenly angry.

### Without Validation

**Mike:** Are you kidding me? So what am I supposed to do? You are ridiculous. I don't even have symptoms and you are telling me to stay home! Lady, I will lose my job! Have you even thought about that? So you want my family to become homeless?

**Oksana:** Sir, I am just doing my job.

**Mike:** Well, you are doing a terrible job! You're asking me to make my family homeless!

**Oksana:** Sir, I am not. I am just doing my job.

**Mike:** Well you don't know anything about my life or my responsibilities. I can't do what you are asking and still keep a roof over my kids' heads.

**Oksana:** Sir, I can only tell you what the guidelines say.

**Mike:** Well I am not going to. I can't.  
(Hangs up.)

*Notice that in this scenario, Oksana is taking what Mike says personally and reacting defensively, which further upsets Mike who feels like his concerns are not recognized.*

### With Validation

**Mike:** Are you kidding me? So what am I supposed to do? You are ridiculous. I don't even have symptoms and you are telling me to stay home! Lady, I will lose my job! Have you even thought about that? So you want my family to become homeless?

**Oksana:** I am so sorry to give you this difficult news. I know it's a lot to think about.

**Mike:** Yeah, it's a lot to think about! I have responsibilities. I can't just go to work. Who is going to pay my bills!?!

**Oksana:** It is a lot to figure out and think about. You have to be responsible for your family and it can be difficult to do that and follow the guidelines.

**Mike:** Are you going to tell me how to do that? I don't think so!

**Oksana:** I really wish I had all the answers because I know your situation is hard. What I can do is tell you about some of the resources I know about and then we can explore if they would help or not.

**Mike:** I don't know if any of them will help.

**Oksana:** I don't know either, but it doesn't hurt to see. At least that will give you more information so you can make the right decisions for you and your family.

**Mike:** I guess it wouldn't hurt.

*Notice that in this scenario, Oksana is validating Mike's concerns, which allow him to feel heard, which in turn, helps him calm down so that he is more receptive to information.*

## Link

After a person has had the opportunity to express themselves, Contact Tracers & Case Investigators can discern the next steps by:

- Reflecting the needs and concerns they have heard expressed
- Asking questions (if needed) to determine additional needs, supports, concerns
- Inquiring about priorities

Pandemics can strain resources and make it more difficult to access resources that may be available. Contact Tracers & Case Investigators may have to prioritize referrals based on the most urgent needs that threaten safety and well-being.

### Social Supports

Social supports are one of the best predictors of future resilience. Help people to identify friends and relatives that they can go to for support and connection, even if it is done remotely. For example, “I know that quarantining can be isolating. During this time, are there people you can connect with that support you, even if it has to be remote?”

### Information and Services

Before referring people to external supports, it is helpful to ground people in the Here & Now and assist them in accessing their own problem-solving capabilities. Recognize that you may not have all the answers at any given moment, especially when situations are rapidly evolving, and resources may be scarce.

### Ground in the Here & Now

When people are distressed or overwhelmed, thinking about all of the many things they need, or all of the things that might happen in the future, it can cause increased stress and distress. Staying in the “here and now” can help people prioritize and feel less overwhelmed. Some helpful questions to help people stay in the ‘Here & Now’ include:

- Out of the things you mentioned, what is your biggest concern?
- What would be the most important thing for you to try and get support for?
- What questions would be most important for me to answer today?

When giving information, be aware that Contact Tracers & Case Investigators can become targets of the frustration, stress, and anger people may feel, especially when their expectations of help have not been met by you or others. In these situations, try to remain calm, be understanding and recognize that much of what the person may be expressing is not a personal attack on you, but rather an expression of frustration, fear, or overwhelm. In this instance, your role may simply be to listen and validate the person’s feelings.

## Empower Problem Solving.

Helping people access their own problem-solving skills can help them feel more in control of a situation. Some helpful questions that facilitate this include:

- What sorts of supports are you already connected to?
- Do you know who you might reach out to for help?
- Who do you know who might have the answer to that?
- Have you ever had to deal with this in the past? What did you do?
- Who helps support you?

People may ask you questions for which you do not have answers. They may also need resources that you are unaware of, or that do not exist. Say only what you know and do not make up information or give false reassurances. Keep messages simple and accurate, and repeat the information to be sure people hear and understand it. For example, "That is a good question, and I wish I had the answer. Unfortunately, I don't or I know you need rental assistance and I wish I could guarantee it could be there for you. Unfortunately, the best I can do at this moment is give you a number to call."

## Coping Strategies

Important information can also include ways to cope or encourage wellbeing during this difficult time. This will help people to feel stronger and to regain a sense of control.

Everyone has natural ways of coping. A good place to begin providing information about coping is to:

- Ask the person to consider how they have coped with difficult situations in the past and affirm their ability to cope with the current situation
- Ask the person to think of people they trust and can talk to
- Ask the person what helps them to feel better

Contact Tracers & Case Investigators can also encourage people to use positive coping strategies, while avoiding negative strategies.

### Positive Coping Strategies

- Sleep and rest
- Limit media and news consumption about COVID-19, especially if this causes worry and stress
- Eat as regularly as possible and drink water
- Talk and spend time with family, friends, and community (even if done remotely)
- Discuss feelings and concerns with someone you trust
- Engage in activities that help you relax (meditate, read, breathe, sing, pray)

If people seem overwhelmed and are having a hard time continuing the conversation, Contact Tracers & Case Investigators can pause and take a moment to provide reassuring words like, "Take your time" "I know this is hard" and "Take as much time as you need".

## PFA Best Practices

Things to Say and Do	Things <u>NOT</u> to Say and Do
Listen – first and foremost, individuals need to be heard and listened to when in distress.	Don't feel like you must have all the answers
Respect privacy and confidentiality	Don't judge what they have or haven't done, or how they are feeling. Don't say: "You shouldn't feel that way," or "You will feel better after the shock wears off."
Let them know you are listening; for example, say "mhmmmm...."	Don't use terms that are too technical.
Be patient and calm.	Don't speculate with people about the state of the world, the virus, etc.
Provide factual information, if you have it. Be honest about what you know and don't know.	Don't tell them someone else's story.
Give information in a way that any person can understand – keep it simple.	Don't talk about your own troubles.
Acknowledge how they are feeling and any losses or important events they tell you about, such as the loss of their loved ones. "I'm so sorry. I can imagine this is very sad for you."	Don't pressure people to tell you more than they voluntarily share.
Acknowledge the person's strengths and how they have helped themselves.	Don't think and act as if you must solve all the person's problems for them.
Allow for silence.	Don't exaggerate your knowledge.
Be honest and trustworthy.	Don't make promises about when or how the person's situation may change.
Respect people's right to make their own well-informed decisions.	Don't take away the person's strength and sense of being able to care for themselves.

## Helpful PFA Responses

Put this by your phone or near your computer. When you get stuck or not sure what to say, refer to it for a helpful prompt or reminder.

### Validation

**Don't forget *LISTENING* is a form of validation!**

**To indicate your presence and that you are listening use some of these words:**

- *OK. Uh huh. Right. I see.*

**In response to someone telling you about a difficult circumstance:**

- *That sounds really difficult/hard.*
- *I am so sorry that is happening to you.*
- *I am so sorry you are having to experience that*

**When someone is having a big reaction:**

- *It makes sense you would feel that way.*
- *I think that is a really normal feeling.*

**When someone is talking about a lot of different things and you are trying to clarify what they or saying:**

- *It sounds like what you are saying is...is that right?*

**When someone is apologizing for their reaction or saying they shouldn't feel a certain way:**

- *I think it is understandable you would feel this way.*
- *That is a totally normal and understandable reaction.*
- *So many people feel just like you do.*

**When you have to correct or counter misinformation:**

- *It makes sense that you think that but experts say...*
- *It's hard with so much information out there to know what is right or who to trust. The best and most accurate information I have is...*

**When you don't have what someone needs:**

- *I really wish I could help you with that...but what I can do is...[What you can do will depend on what is asked for and what resources you have. It could include providing a list of resources, having someone else reach out, or even just offering to listen.]*
- *I wish I could do more.*
- *I am sorry that I don't have what you need right now. I wish I did.*

### Grounding in the Here & Now

*What sort of information would be most helpful to you today?*

*Out of all those things you mentioned, what is most important for you right now?*

*What is the question that is top of mind for you?*

*What is your biggest concern right now?*

*What do you think you need to do first?*

*What is one step you think you can take today?*

*What is your biggest priority right now?*

*What is the biggest obstacle or barrier right now to doing....?*

### Empowering Problem Solving

*Who do you usually turn to for help?*

*Who do you know who can...?*

*Do you know anyone who can help you with...?*

*Have you ever had a problem like 'x' before? [If so] What did you do?*

*Can you think of anyone you could reach out to who could...?*

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- <sup>i</sup> “Psychological First Aid for Ebola Virus Disease Outbreak.” World Health Organization. World Health Organization, May 11, 2017. [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/emergencies/psychological\\_first\\_aid\\_ebola/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/psychological_first_aid_ebola/en/).
- <sup>ii</sup> “Learn: Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR).” NCTSN Learning Center, n.d. <https://learn.nctsn.org/course/index.php?categoryid=11>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Madhavan, Aaron, and JH Bloomberg School of Public Health. “Johns Hopkins RAPID Psychological First Aid.” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, April 16, 2018. <https://www.jhsph.edu/academics/continuing-and-executive-education/professional-trainings/rapidpfa/>.
- <sup>iv</sup> “Psychological First Aid: Guide for Field Workers.” World Health Organization. World Health Organization. Accessed November 21, 2020. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548205>.
- <sup>v</sup> “Webinar April 22, 2020 - Psychological First Aid: Addressing Mental Health Distress During Disasters.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 14, 2020. [https://emergency.cdc.gov/epic/learn/2020/webinar\\_20200422.asp](https://emergency.cdc.gov/epic/learn/2020/webinar_20200422.asp).
- <sup>vi</sup> “Psychological First Aid: Supporting Yourself and Others During COVID-19.” Red Cross. Accessed November 21, 2020. <https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/classes/psychological-first-aid:-supporting-yourself-and-others-during-covid-19/a6R3o0000014Zlg.html>.
- <sup>vii</sup> Peterson, Sarah. “About PFA.” The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, March 29, 2018. <https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/psychological-first-aid-and-skills-for-psychological-recovery/about-pfa>.
- <sup>viii</sup> “Psychological First Aid: How You Can Support Well-Being in Disaster Victims.” SAMHSA. Accessed November 21, 2020. <https://www.samhsa.gov/node/669665>.
- <sup>ix</sup> “Quickly Calming Distress and Improving Mental Health.” American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association, n.d. <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/distress-mental-health>.
- <sup>x</sup> “Introduction and Overview.” Psychological First Aid (PFA). Accessed November 22, 2020. [https://relief.unboundmedicine.com/relief/view/PTSD-National-Center-for-PTSD/1230010/all/Introduction\\_and\\_Overview](https://relief.unboundmedicine.com/relief/view/PTSD-National-Center-for-PTSD/1230010/all/Introduction_and_Overview).