

Mental health and Psychological first aid

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Mental health problems are an extremely important issue worldwide due to their impact on the human rights and quality of life of those affected and their families. The potential mental health and psychosocial consequences are well known, as rates of common mental disorders like Depression, Anxiety, and Substance use apart from general psychological distress, social needs and impairments in social functioning increase among those exposed to crisis events.⁽¹⁾

Psychological and mental distress can happen anywhere — in our homes, in our schools, in the workplace, on the transport system, in the supermarket, in public spaces, in the military and in hospital. Psychological and Mental Health First Aid is a potentially lifesaving skill that we all need to have.⁽²⁾

The National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 data reveal that nearly 15 per cent of Indian adults need active interventions for one or more mental health issues. One in 20 Indian suffers from depression and need professional help.⁽³⁾

Crisis events – both large-scale and individual – occur in every community in the world – Large-scale events include natural disasters, war and terrorist attacks, disease outbreaks, large scale displacement of people and communities. Individual events affect one or a few people, such as accidents, robbery, assault etc and have physical, social and emotional consequences for only those who are affected.

This year on 7th April 2017 the World commemorated World Health Day on the theme – “Depression - lets talk”.⁽⁴⁾ Discussing mental health problems and getting timely help for acute and chronic problems is more sought after now.

Also every year World Mental Health Day is a day earmarked for October 10th every year for global mental health education, awareness and advocacy.⁽⁵⁾ It was first celebrated in 1992 at the initiative of the World Federation for Mental Health, a global mental health organization with members and contacts in many countries. On this day, each October, thousands of supporters observe an annual awareness program to bring attention to Mental Illness and its major effects on people’s lives worldwide.

World Mental Health Day is an annual event which aims to not only raise awareness of mental health issues across the globe but also to mobilize efforts in support of mental health. In the year 2016 the theme was Psychological First Aid (PFA).

PFA is important, first-line psychosocial support for people affected by crisis events – PFA, like medical “first aid”, is not enough on its own. ‘Psychological first-aid’ covers both psychological and social support. It is not a standalone intervention and a part of the comprehensive mental health-care system. Mental illnesses, like any other physical disease, need appropriate and timely care. The approach was successfully used following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal.⁽⁶⁾ Equally important is the help and support given by family members, neighbors, teachers, community members and first responders of various kinds (emergency medical teams, police, and fire fighters).

Psychological Firstaid encompasses the following:^(7,8)

- It is Humane, supportive & practical assistance to fellow human beings who recently suffered a serious stressor.
- It is Non-intrusive, practical care and support. It involves assessing needs and concerns, helping people to address basic needs (food, water).
- It is listening, but not pressuring people to talk, comforting people and helping them to feel calm, helping people connect to information, services and social supports, protecting people from further harm.

PFA strategies are for children, adolescents, parents/caretakers, adults exposed to disasters or terrorism.

- It includes basic information-gathering techniques to help health care providers make rapid assessments of survivors’ immediate concerns and needs, and to implement supportive activities in a systematic manner.
- Psychological First Aid relies on old-tested, evidence-informed strategies that can be provided in a variety of disaster settings.
- Psychological First Aid emphasizes developmentally and culturally appropriate interventions for various ages and backgrounds.
- Psychological First Aid includes hand-outs that provide important information for youth, adults, and families for their use over the course of recovery.

Mental Health First Aid Action Plan, with the acronym ALGEE are:⁽⁹⁾

- Approach, assess and assist with any crisis
- Listen non-judgmentally

- Give support and information
- Encourage appropriate professional help
- Encourage other supports

The Action Principles of PFA (WHO 2011)⁽²⁾

Look	Check for safety.	
	Check for people with obvious urgent basic needs.	
	Check for people with serious distress reactions.	
Listen	Approach people who may need support.	
	Ask about people’s needs and concerns.	
	Listen to people, and help them to feel calm.	
Link	Help people address basic needs and access services.	
	Help people cope with problems.	
	Give information.	
	Connect people with loved ones and social support.	

Integrating psychological health & mental health in to our daily lives.⁽²⁾



Exposure to disaster, terrorism and post-event adversities is often accompanied by a loss of hope. It has been observed that among those who are exposed to disaster, terrorism and post event adversities, those who maintain one or more of the following characteristics are better able to cope:⁽⁹⁾

- Optimism (because they can have hope for their future)
- Confidence that life is predictable
- Belief that things will work out as well as can

- reasonably be expected
 - Belief that outside sources act benevolently on one’s behalf (responsive government)
 - Strong faith-based beliefs
 - Positive belief (for example, “I’m lucky, things usually work out for me”)
- Providing people with needed resources like support of housing, vocational employment, finances can increase a sense of empowerment, hope, and restored dignity. Therefore, assisting the survivor with

current or anticipated problems is a central component of Psychological First Aid.

Social support is related to emotional well-being and recovery following disaster and terrorism. People who are well connected to others are more likely to engage in supportive activities (both receiving and giving support) that lead to better recovery. Social support can come in many forms. These include:

- **Emotional Support:** hugs, a listening ear, understanding, love, acceptance
- **Social Connection:** feeling when one has things and experiences in common with other people, having people to share activities
- **Feeling Needed:** feeling that you are important to others, that you are valued, useful and productive, and that people appreciate you.
- **Reassurance of Self-Worth:** having people help you have confidence in yourself and your abilities, that you can handle the challenges you face
- **Reliable Support:** having people reassure you that they will be there for you in case you need them, that you have people you can rely on to help you
- **Advice and Information:** having people show you how to do something or give you information or good advice, having people help you understand that your way of reacting to what has happened is common, having good examples to learn from about how to cope in positive ways with what is happening
- **Physical Assistance:** having people help you perform tasks, like carrying things, repairing and fixing up things, and helping with documentation.
- **Material Assistance:** having people give you things, like food, clothing, shelter, medicine, building materials, or money Fostering connections as soon as possible and assisting survivors in developing and maintaining social connections is critical to recovery.

While providing Psychological first Aid there are situations requiring a referral like the following:

- An acute medical problem that needs immediate attention
- An acute mental health problem that needs immediate attention
- Worsening of a pre-existing medical, emotional, or behavioural problem
- Threat of harm to self or others
- Concerns related to the use of alcohol or drugs
- Cases involving domestic, child, or elder abuse (be aware of reporting laws)
- When medication is needed for stabilization

PFA is designed for delivery by mental health and other disaster response workers who provide early relief to affected individuals including first responder teams, incident command systems primary and emergency health care teams, Community Emergency response teams and other disaster response organizations.⁽¹⁰⁾

Many people with depression and other mental health problems can be treated successfully by community health workers, but so far no country has

scaled up this approach. Vikram Patel, a pioneer in the provision of mental health care in settings without mental health professionals feels PFA is a sound method to bridge the gap.

PFA online includes a 6-hour interactive course that puts the participant in the role of a provider in a post-disaster scene.⁽⁸⁾ It features innovative activities, video demonstrations, and mentor tips from the nation's trauma experts and survivors. PFA online also offers a Learning Community where participants can share about experiences using PFA in the field, receive guidance during times of disaster, and obtain additional resources and training.

It is wrong for mental health to continue to remain in the shadows. There are many stories of suffering and indignity but suffering is not inevitable. Inclusion of 'mental health' in the Sustainable Development Goals has brought new hope and enhanced visibility to mental health as a public health priority.⁽¹¹⁾ It is imperative that we make lives around us happier and healthier – in our homes, in our neighbourhood and the workplace. Everybody should join hands in doing something to alleviate human suffering.

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