Psychological First Aid

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Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a set of practical, supportive actions aimed at helping individuals in the immediate aftermath of a crisis or traumatic event. It is grounded in the understanding that people can experience a wide range of emotional and psychological responses to distressing events, and providing early, compassionate support can help mitigate the risk of longer-term mental health issues.

PFA is not a therapeutic intervention but a first-line response to help individuals stabilize, feel safe, and regain a sense of control. The main goal is to reduce initial distress, promote healthy coping strategies, and connect individuals with appropriate resources.

Key Components of Psychological First Aid

1. **Ensure Physical and Emotional Safety**

• The first step in PFA is to ensure the person's safety. This includes ensuring that they are in a physically and emotionally safe environment. Emotional safety involves creating a calm, non-judgmental space for the individual to express their feelings. This may involve finding a quiet, private space at work or finding time to speak to them later in the day or evening.

2. Provide a Calm and Compassionate Presence

• A critical aspect of PFA is being a calm, supportive, and empathetic listener. People in distress may be confused, scared, or overwhelmed. Listening attentively without rushing to give advice or solutions helps the individual feel heard and validated. A simple "I'm here for you" can have a powerful impact.

3. Normalize Responses

• It's essential to communicate that the emotional reactions people are experiencing are common and understandable in the aftermath of trauma. For example, shock, sadness, anxiety, and confusion are all normal responses to crisis situations. Normalizing these feelings helps reduce feelings of isolation and self-blame.

4. Provide Practical Help

• Helping individuals address these needs can reduce their sense of being overwhelmed and allow them to focus on emotional recovery. This can include something as simple as connecting them to resources like the Peer Support Program to helping them with navigate the logistics of stepping away from the OR/ICU for a break or even helping them go home for the day to help them process and recover.

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5. Support Connection to Social Support

• One of the most important elements of PFA is encouraging individuals to connect with their social support network—family, friends, or community resources. Social support has been shown to be crucial in the recovery process, as it can provide emotional comfort and help individuals process their feelings. If appropriate, you can help them contact loved ones or reach out to a professional for long-term care.

6. Provide Information

• During a crisis, people may feel disoriented and uncertain about what to do next. Providing clear, accurate, and practical information about what to expect and what resources are available can help reduce confusion and anxiety. This could include information on how to access mental health services or other university support programs. Make sure that you keep the list of WashU/WUDA resources handy.

7. Encourage Positive Coping Strategies

• While it is important to acknowledge the distress someone is feeling, it's equally important to encourage healthy coping strategies. This can include breathing exercises, taking breaks, or engaging in activities that promote relaxation or a sense of normalcy. Offering practical suggestions for stress relief can help people begin to regain control over their emotions and actions.

Important Considerations in Providing PFA

• Be Mindful of Personal Boundaries: Some people may not want to talk about their experience immediately. It's important to respect their boundaries and let them know that support is available whenever they are ready.

• Recognize the Need for Professional Care: While PFA is designed to provide immediate support, it's not a substitute for professional mental health care. If someone shows signs of severe distress or ongoing mental health difficulties (e.g., severe depression, suicidal thoughts, or acute anxiety), it's important to refer them to mental health professionals for further evaluation and care.

References:

1. World Health Organization (WHO). (2011). Psychological First Aid: Guide for Field Workers. WHO. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548205

3. American Psychological Association (APA). (2020). Psychological First Aid: What It Is and How to Provide It. https://www.apa.org/topics/disasters-response/disaster-mental-health-psychologists#:~:text=Psychological%20first%20aid%20(PFA)%20is,professionals%20and%20other%20first%20responders.