

Compassionate workplaces: approaching and supporting the psychological wellbeing of your colleagues

Dr Sika Turner July 2020

“ I would rather make mistakes in kindness
and compassion than work miracles in
unkindness and hardness. ”

Mother Theresa



Components of human compassion

Cognitive component

“ I understand your problems”.

Affective component

“I feel what you feel”.

Motivational component

“I want to help you out of this.”



How to support your colleagues

Basic standpoints:

- *It's ok to not be ok*
- *People have normal responses to abnormal events*
- *Experiencing stress is human – it doesn't mean you are not coping*



Skill #1: How to start a conversation about wellbeing

Ask about their wellbeing

“you dealt with this situation really well, but I’m wondering how it has impacted you..”

Briefly explain why you are asking, for example:

“I’ve noticed that recently...”

“you’ve mentioned a few times that you are not sleeping well and I just wanted to check in with you about that...”

Don’t pressure people into talking about things that they do not want to talk about.

Consider your timing and who else is around: are you asking in an environment where your colleague can genuinely answer?



Skill #2: How to listen to your colleagues

Do ask direct clarifying questions to avoid misunderstandings and where possible, provide rationale for why you are asking

Check your understanding of what they are telling you

Try not to assume that you know how they feel or what is going on for them until they have actually told you

Don't interrupt, judge how they have responded, talk about your own troubles in this situation, give false promises around safety, try to solve all their problems or take away their sense of strength and coping



Skill #3: Help marshal resources

Internal resources

- Help the person consider what coping strategies they have previously used and found beneficial
- Help the person remember their inner strengths and resiliency factors
- How can these be harnessed to address the current issue?

External resources & factors

- What are the person's support networks : friends, family, team
- Multiple issues can overwhelm and contribute to feeling out of control so help your colleague focus on one issue, and the next step rather than multiple steps down the path



Factors in setting up the encounter for success

Make time to be fully present so you are able to listen

- Be curious and interested

Consider where you catch up

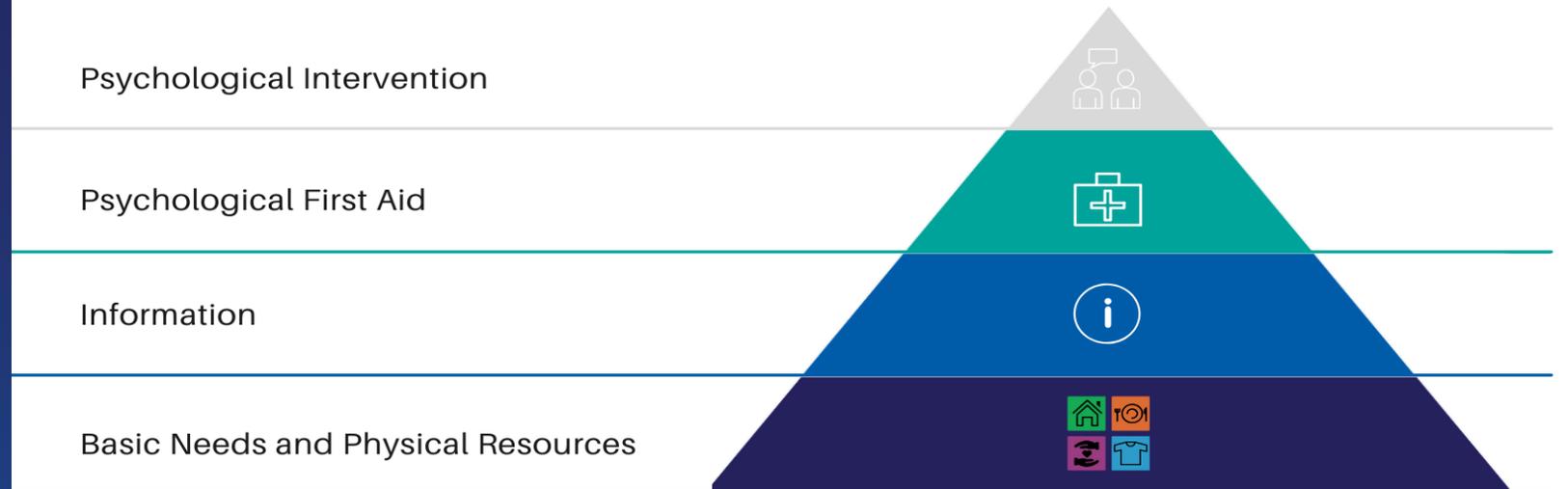
- Get away from the main workplace if possible
- Unless you are seeking team participation, try and find somewhere more private
- A walk outside can work well

There is no requirement to fix what is happening

- Work with the individual to consider their own resources to address their concerns
- Explore what has already been tried to prevent them from continuing to try something that is not working
- Consider what would be a small sign that things are heading in the right direction
- This assists in stopping the spiral and creating hope which can be the first step toward healing and re-establishment of equilibrium



Levels of support: where to start



adapted from 'The Psychological Needs of Healthcare Staff as a Result of the Coronavirus Pandemic, BPS, 2020



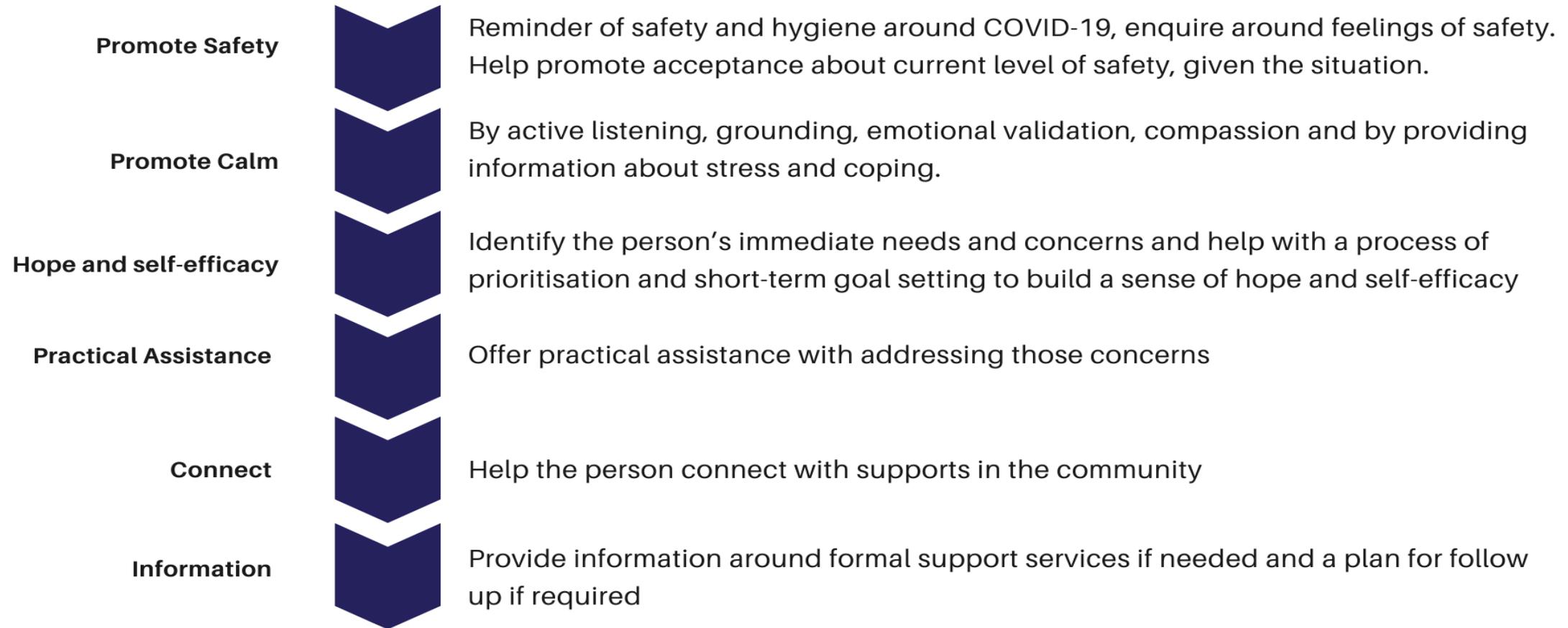
A quick primer in PFA

Psychological First Aid is a **compassionate and supportive presence, the purpose of which is to mitigate the impacts of acute distress.**

Is it NOT psychotherapy and mainly requires you to be **present, compassionate and to listen** to someone who is having a **NORMAL** reaction to a situation that is highly unusual.



What are the components of PFA (Psychological First Aid): Normal human compassion?



One on one buddy/mentoring

Enormous value in talking with someone from your own discipline who “gets” the specific challenges

All communication modes are ok: there is no right way to feel or respond to these unprecedented circumstances

Sharing these experiences with a colleague can be very beneficial

- Discover you are not alone in your responses
- Can assist in dissipating associated heightened emotion
- Allows for some processing of events

There is power in listening – you don’t need to find the solution



What's normal

- Fear, anxiety, shock, denial, disbelief, anger, irritability, guilt, shame, sadness and hopelessness
- Feeling disconnected and numb
- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia and recurrent dreams
- Being easily startled
- Aches, pains, muscle tension, agitation, general fatigue

What's not

Signs that more help is needed

- Having difficulty functioning at home, unable to rest or take time out (not caused by work demands)
- Experiencing severe anxiety, fear, depression, excessive irritability and anger
- Unable to maintain their close family relationships, withdrawing and isolating yourself
- Feeling emotionally numb and distant, emotionally disconnected from work and colleagues
- Having persistent intrusive memories, consistently feeling overwhelmed and/or out of control
- Using alcohol or other drugs to manage their thoughts and feelings
- Avoidance “I’m fine, too busy, not available”
- Feelings of self-blame or guilt if you are unable to act or respond within your own moral code
- Pre-existing vulnerabilities which may be exacerbated by the intensity of the crisis
 - E.g., always had a tendency to worry but it didn’t impact functioning, but now it does

