

Stress First Aid 101

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Adapted from the work of Dr. Patricia Watson, National Center for PTSD and The Island Health Stress First Aid Model

This model of Stress First Aid (SFA) was originally developed for use with military and law enforcement personnel. Animal welfare providers also work in high-stress environments, which have further intensified since the COVID pandemic began in 2020.

The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a **self-care and peer support framework that includes seven actions that can help you identify and address early signs of stress reactions in yourself and others** in an ongoing way (not just after single “critical incidents”). It is a model for both short-term recovery and longer-term resilience.

Stress Continuum Model

Figure 1: The Stress Continuum Model

READY (Green)	REACTING (Yellow)	INJURED (Orange)	ILL (Red)
<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimal functioning Adaptive growth Wellness <p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> At one’s best Well-trained and prepared In control Physically, mentally and spiritually fit Mission-focused Motivated Calm and steady Having fun Behaving ethically 	<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mild and transient distress or impairment Always goes away Low risk <p>CAUSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any stressor <p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling irritable, anxious or down Loss of motivation Loss of focus Difficulty sleeping Muscle tension or other physical changes Not having fun 	<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More severe and persistent distress or impairment Leaves an emotional/mental “scar” Higher risk <p>CAUSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life threat Loss Moral injury Wear and tear <p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of control Panic, rage or depression No longer feeling like normal self Excessive guilt, shame or blame 	<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clinical mental disorder Unhealed stress injury causing life impairment <p>TYPES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PTSD Depression Anxiety Substance abuse <p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symptoms persist and worsen over time Severe distress or social or occupational impairment Hopelessness

Central to the Stress First Aid module is the stress continuum, which is a visual tool for assessing your own and others' stress responses. Stress responses lay along a spectrum of severity and type. Every person will react when faced with stressors that are severe, personal, or extended. During the course of reaction and recovery, a person's state can change from Green to Yellow to Orange into Red zone, and back again.

A key goal of this model is to reduce stigma. We often expect ourselves and each other to be ready or "in the green" at all times, but the reality is that we cycle through these colors all the time.

Your Stress Signature

We all have different "stress signatures", or patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating that show up when we are distressed. While everyone's stress signature is unique, we tend to react to stress with similar patterns each time we are faced with stressful situations. We can learn to identify and monitor ourselves for these unique stress signs to help us quickly recognize when we are moving towards the right of the stress continuum. *When we're in the Orange Zone we no longer feel like our normal selves; our stress reactions are persistent and having a negative impact on our functioning. We may feel like we're not in control of our body, thoughts, and/or emotions.*

Core Actions of the Stress First Aid Model

Stress First Aid is based on a set of five evidence-based elements that have been linked to better functioning after stress and adversity. These elements are:

- 1. COVER** - Regaining a sense of both physical and psychological safety.
- 2. CALM** - Reducing the intensity of physiological, emotional and behavioral stress reactions.
- 3. CONNECTION** - Feeling connected to sources of nourishing social support.
- 4. COMPETENCE** - Increasing a sense of self-efficacy (feeling competent to handle situations and emotions).
- 5. CONFIDENCE** - Experiencing hope, or confidence, in yourself, your community, and the world.

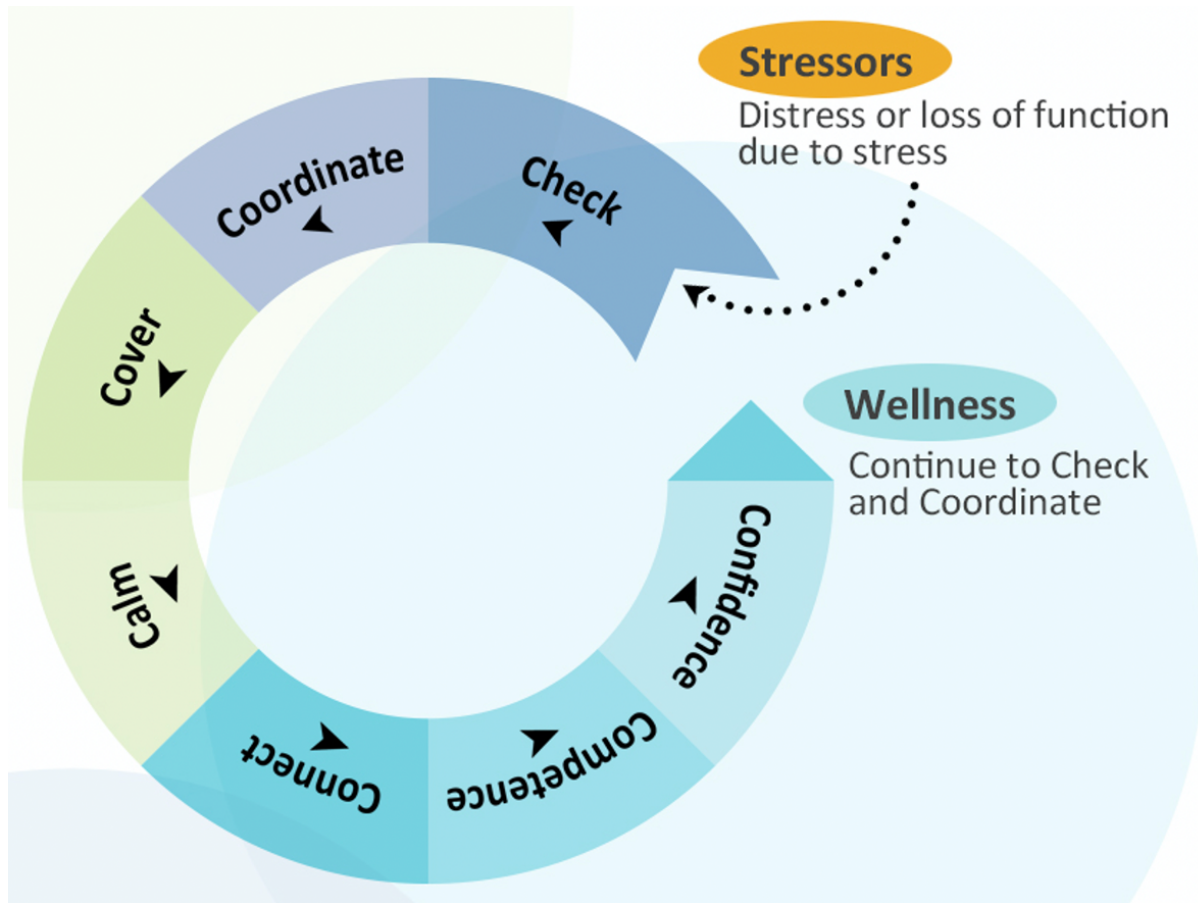


Image Source: National Center for PTSD

The SFA model includes two additional actions, Check and Coordinate, which are considered *continuous* actions because they should be performed in an ongoing way to monitor and recruit assistance any time a person is showing persistent Orange zone reactions. In contrast, the other five SFA actions are used only *as needed*.

6. CHECK is the starting point, recognizing that we can't address what we aren't aware of or don't acknowledge. We need to be observing ourselves and others for signs of stress.

7. COORDINATE is about thoughtfully linking to supports as needed: knowing when to get help and learning how to help others or connect them with trustworthy sources of help.

CHECK ACTIONS:

Pause: In prolonged crisis mode, we can get so caught up in doing and reacting that we lose sight of what is happening within and around us. Pause doesn't have to be long, just long enough to take stock.

Observe: What am I feeling? What am I doing? What are others doing around me? Am I noticing Irritability, frustration, feeling checked out, or making mistakes? Where are you on the stress continuum? Where is your co-worker, your team?

If you think someone is functioning the Orange or Red Zone, approach with nonjudgmental curiosity:

- If you see something, say something
- State your observations - just the facts, without interpretations or judgments
- State why you are concerned about the behavior
- Try to understand the other person's perception of the behaviors

Respond:

- What do I need? What do you need?
- What can I/we do to help?
- Provide the other C's below as needed.

COORDINATE ACTIONS:

Involves: getting help or more information, referring to outside resources as needed, in the most respectful and acceptable way for the individual.

Signs that external resources might be appropriate:

- The person desires it.
- They (you) are in the red zone, or in the orange zone and have been for a while.

- The need is beyond the capacity of peers, more intensive help is needed.

Resources to consider:

- Trusted friend or family member
- Supervisor, team lead, HR
- Spiritual support
- Employee Assistance Program, Physician Health Program
- Community services

Confidentiality may be challenging when using the Coordinate action, so you may need to ask for advice from those in your organization as to the most appropriate ways to refer for care or inform others in your setting.

COVER ACTIONS:

Cover is about safety: physical safety and psychological safety. A constant state of overwhelming fear and threat is hard on the body, leading to exhaustion and illness.

- 1) Take breaks from high stress, high demand environments, so your body and nervous system can recover. This may look like ensuring your workplace has a break-room or a quiet space where it is possible to let down your guard a little. Create these spaces at home as well.
- 2) Seek out and provide the most accurate and credible information about risks related to disease, natural disasters, violence, and other safety risks.
- 3) Do your part to make your workplace a space that is kind, tolerant, and inclusive.
- 4) Increase safety for others by remaining available and ready to assist as needed.

CALM ACTIONS:

Calming is about reducing the intensity of physiological, emotional, and behavioral stress reactions - both in the moment and with practices for long-term sustainability.

Practice these yourself, model them, encourage and support others:

- **“Pump the Brakes” interventions** meet immediate needs to regain stability.

- Grounding exercises help you get out of your head (worries about the future or past) and connect with the present moment. This calms you and also helps you return to a more effective state of focus.
 - Pause, drop your shoulders back, sit or stand up straight. What hurts? What could use a stretch, a different position?
 - Look around, take an inventory of your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel/touch?
 - Attend in detail to the physical sensations and sequences of regular activities, such as handwashing or eating a snack.
- Does your body have what it needs to function: food, water, rest? When was the last time you or your team member ate, drank water, got to use the bathroom, sat down?
- Calm your body intentionally with skills that settle your nervous system quickly:
 - Paced breathing: With one hand on the chest and one hand on the belly, with each breath try to breath more from the belly (diaphragmatic breathing). Slow down the breath and try making the outbreath longer than the in breath.
 - If you have the option, try brief intense exercise such as walking up the stairs.

- **Thinking interventions** help you turn the way you think into support, instead of a stressor:

- Focus on what is in your power to control, rather than ruminating about what is out of your control.
- Taking in the good is a practice of balancing the negatives that naturally draw our attention by intentionally noticing and giving time to goodness.
- Practice compassion for yourself and others. Give yourself and others the benefit of the doubt for having stress responses.

- **Body-Mind Maintenance interventions:** Resting or sleeping for as long as is necessary, which is sometimes the only thing that will restore a person to more effective functioning.

CONNECT ACTIONS:

Connection involves actively restoring or increasing nourishing social support and contact.

Connection helps us in many ways:

- Co-regulation refers to the idea that calmness is contagious, both emotionally and physically. Seek out calm and grounded people, and when you are able, remember how valuable that kind of presence can be for your team.
- Tend and befriend - belonging to a group enhances an individual's sense of safety and multiplies the resources for problem solving and tangible support. It can be tempting to isolate under stress, but this undermines our sense of safety.
- Reach out to those who may be vulnerable and isolated and be open to receiving outreach from others. Simply inviting someone to work on a task with you can help reduce isolation.
- Remember that connection also includes expert resources (counseling and medical care).

COMPETENCE ACTIONS:

Competence is about our belief in our skills to cope, solve problems, and obtain resources.

Competence can be individual, but it is also a quality of teams and communities that pool their skills and resources. Actions that support competence include:

- Identifying skill gaps and learning new skills builds competence.
- Taking some time to engage in activities where we feel confident of our skills: this can help to remind us how capable we really are.
- Remembering past times where we have coped with unfamiliar situations and unexpected stressors can boost our feelings of competence.

- Working as a group to increase access to resources increases our faith in the competence of our community.

CONFIDENCE ACTIONS:

Confidence taps into ideas of hope, optimism, values, and meaning. It goes beyond just meeting the demands of the next task in front of us and reminds us why we do what we do. This may look like:

- Fostering trust, which can be trust in many things, such as peers, equipment, leaders, self or mission.
- Increasing hope, which is often the result of forgiving self or others, or being able to imagine the future in a positive way.
- Fostering meaning, which includes the process of making sense of the events on one's life, having a sense of purpose, holding a spiritual or philosophical perspective related to the human condition, or having a belief in others that gets one through difficult times.

Remember:

- Increased stress responses are normal during this time and need to be de-stigmatized.
- This is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to pace ourselves with lots of care and support.
- We need both self-care AND organizational care!
- Stay aware of the signs of stress vulnerability in ourselves and others. Actively check in. The stress continuum is a shorthand for sharing how we and others are doing. Use it often!

Further resources

The Compassion in Balance Program:

Website: <https://www.compassioninbalance.com/sfa-resources>

Contact: jessica@jessicadolce.com

VA National Center for PTSD Stress First Aid: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/stress_first_aid.asp

Island Health Stress First Aid Model: <https://medicalstaff.islandhealth.ca/sites/default/files/covid-19/stress-first-aid-model-handout.pdf>