

What is the difference between SFA, PFA, and MHFA?

Many people may have been trained in some sort of support or response strategy and may wonder if they are all the same. Three common trainings are [Stress First Aid \(SFA\)](#), [Psychological First Aid \(PFA\)](#), and [Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](#). There are differences among these three trainings that are helpful to understand. Consider your audience's needs when selecting the most appropriate training. It is important to know when to use which approach to avoid the risk of additional harm or stress.

Stress First Aid (SFA): Stress First Aid is a framework that was developed from a military resilience program and addresses general stress reactions, large or small. It can be applied to oneself or used with others. The emphasis in SFA is using appropriate core actions to help identify and address early signs of a person's stress responses. It is not designed to be used just after critical incidents or disasters (as is Psychological First Aid) and it is not about addressing a person's mental disorder (as is Mental Health First Aid). The goal of SFA is to view stress reactions as being on a continuum, and to address those reactions before they develop into more severe issues. The core skills of SFA are applicable to many settings and circumstances, and a variety of occupations, including those seen as high-risk (law enforcement, military, healthcare). SFA steps include Check, Coordinate, Cover, Calm, Connect, Competence and Confidence.

Psychological First Aid (PFA): Psychological First Aid is an intervention used as part of an initial disaster response. The goal of PFA is to help those affected by a disaster be safe, become stable in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and connect them with aid and resources to help them in their recovery. It initially was provided by those with mental health backgrounds but has been adapted for peers to provide as well. Although sometimes addressing crises, it is not designed to provide therapy. Rather, it provides ways to help reduce the initial distress that is often experienced, and to encourage adaptive functioning and coping as people recover. PFA assumes that those impacted by a disaster will experience a variety of reactions, some of which may cause distress or concern or could interfere with their daily coping for a short while. There is no assumption of all recipients having – or developing – a mental health problem because they experienced a trauma/disaster, and it is designed to help reduce the risk of the development of psychological difficulties. It does not address or focus on mental illness. It can be provided in a variety of settings: in the field, at shelters, hospitals, and elsewhere. Core actions include engagement, safety, stabilization as needed, gathering information, and providing practical assistance, connection, psychoeducation on healthy coping tactics, and linkage with services as needed.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA): Mental Health First Aid is a program and approach that teaches people how to recognize, understand, and address mental illness and substance use disorders. It educates people on how to identify if someone is developing or having a mental health issue. The focus is to provide support until the appropriate professional help can be received or the crisis is resolved. It can be used to provide help to someone who is developing a mental health problem, or has a problem that is worsening, or is undergoing a mental health crisis. In short, MHFA is useful for working or dealing with someone who has or is developing a mental health problem, such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, or substance use disorder. It teaches participants how to identify risk factors, warnings, and signs or symptoms of worsening mental health or addiction problems. Their core steps include assessing for suicide or self-harm, non-judgmental listening, providing reassurance and information, encouragement to get professional help, and providing other supportive strategies.