



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Stress First Aid Self Care / Organizational Support Model

The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a self-care and peer support model originally developed for those in high-risk occupations like military, fire and rescue, and law enforcement. It includes seven actions that help to identify and address early signs of stress reactions in yourself and others in an ongoing way (not just after “critical incidents”).

While stress reactions may be relatively common in stressful jobs, SFA can be used by anyone who is in an ongoing stressful situation, particularly when functioning is impaired or there is significant distress involved, such as:

- No longer feeling like your normal self
- Loss of control of emotions or behavior
- Excessive guilt, shame or blame
- Panic, rage, or depression

Stress Continuum Model

The Stress Continuum Model is a foundational part of the SFA model. It was developed as a way to assess the level of your own and other’s stress responses. It was first developed for by Navy/Marine Corps service members as a way to acknowledge that stress reactions occur on a continuum, and that early awareness and response could bring a person back into a less severe zone before they had the need for more formal intervention.

The crux of the stress continuum model is that stress responses lie along a spectrum of severity. Everyone will react when faced with severe enough or extended enough stress, and many factors can affect how they respond and how they recover. A person’s reactions can range relatively rapidly from Green to Yellow to Orange to Red zone, and back again.

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 and legally 	<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mild and transient distress or impairment Always goes away Low risk <p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling irritable, anxious or down Loss of motivation Loss of focus Difficulty sleep Muscle tension, heightened heart rate, breathing, or other physical changes Not having fun <p>CAUSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any stressor / trigger 	<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More severe and persistent distress or impairment Leaves an emotional/mental "scar" Higher risk <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>CAUSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life threat Loss Inner conflict Excessive wear and tear 	<p>DEFINITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent and disabling distress or loss of function Clinical mental disorders Unhealed stress injuries <p>FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symptoms persist and worsen over time Severe distress or social or occupational impairment Hopelessness <p>TYPES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PTSD Depression Anxiety Substance abuse

Nash, W. P. (2011). *US Marine Corps and Navy combat and operational stress continuum model: A tool for leaders. Combat and operational behavioral health, 107-119.*

The internal or external stigma associated with reacting to stress can result in someone trying to conceal stress reactions from peers and those at work, to avoid perceived judgment, employment consequences, and/or medical or psychological intervention. However, when a person recognizes the signs of orange zone stress in themselves or others around them, it can often make a difference to be more disciplined about self-care for a period of time, or to support a coworker or get them connected with a trusted support. This may help prevent stress reactions from progressing into the Red Zone.

Four types of stress are most likely to move someone into the orange zone. Generally, entering the orange or red zones are the result of a combination of the four following types of stressors:

- **Life Threat:** life-threatening or other situations that provoke terror, horror or helplessness. This type of injury can include experiencing a near-miss or close call, or witnessing or hearing about the life-threatening experiences of others.
- **Loss:** grief due to the loss of close coworkers, leaders, family members, people we feel responsible for, or other cared-for individuals. This can also include loss of role, functioning, relationships, and values.
- **Inner Conflict:** a sense of inner turmoil due to conflict between one's moral/ethical beliefs and current experiences. Inner conflict can result from acting outside of internal, self-imposed morals or values, or the perception of contributing to or being unable to prevent harm to others. Indications for inner conflict include the words: "could've," "should've," "ought to have," "why me?" or "if only."
- **Wear and Tear:** the result of fatigue and accumulation of prolonged stress, including from non-operational sources, without sufficient sleep, rest and restoration.

The Stress First Aid Model's Core Actions



William Nash, Richard Westphal, Patricia Watson, Brett Litz; 2009

Stress First Aid is based on a set of five evidence-based elements that have been linked to better functioning after stress and adversity across a number of settings, including safety (cover), calming, connectedness, self-efficacy (competence), and hope (confidence). Two additional actions, Check and Coordinate, were added, which 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*.

Check

The Check action in SFA involves increased awareness about stress reactions in yourself and your coworkers in an ongoing way, whether stressors at work or at home cause them. The Check action often begins with awareness that you or another individual has been exposed to specific stressors. However, what triggers the sequence of Checks that initiate SFA are not necessarily the events themselves but *indications* that you or someone who has been exposed to these events is functioning in the Orange or Red Zone.

The Check strategies include both those for self-care and for checking on others. The table on the next page includes some self-awareness stress indicators common to workers in high stress environments.

Stress Indicators	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in eating habits • Change in weight • Loss of will power • Losing interest / apathy • Can't hold a conversation • Excessive guilt • Taking lots of time off • Drinking more • Conflict in relationships • Fatigue / more sleep • Don't give self break (leaders) • Changes in relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of control • No longer feeling like self • Can't get tasks done • Can't think clearly • Things excessively piling up • Isolating self • Feeling overly busy, hurried • Physical changes • Going through the motions • Memory problems • Post traumatic stress symptoms • Depressive or anxiety symptoms

"I have made a very conscious effort to keep tabs on myself. The big stress indicators for me are fatigue, having a hard time focusing, being short on the fuse, not exercising, and not doing the things I like, but instead staying in and watching television."

Examples of Check strategies to use when checking on others include:

- Pick the right place and time to talk.
- Begin with a casual two-way communication to get someone talking.
- Find the right way to check on someone without annoying them (i.e., writing an email or texting versus calling or talking in person).
- Check in on anniversaries or reminders of events that were particularly hard.

"One of the key points of check is knowing your people, and spending time with them. Then you can recognize those subtle changes. What I've done is to start a conversation about anything except what I think might be bugging them, and then I actively listen. And once again I'm talking the floodgates open, and it goes well."

OSCAR

Many people feel uncomfortable asking others about their stress reactions. We know how to have casual conversations with peers, but when it comes to discussing personal issues or emotions, people often don't know where or how to start. Another common barrier to accurate assessment is the almost automatic denial of experiencing any stressors, distress, or changes in functioning. One tool that can be effective in overcoming these obstacles is "OSCAR" communication—a mnemonic (memory device) for the five steps.

OSCAR Steps:

- **Observe**
- **State Observations**
- **Clarify Role**
- **Ask Why**
- **Respond**

Here's how it works: you have observed a co-worker keeping to themselves after a stressful event, such as the death or injury of another member of the department. You approach the withdrawn person and strike up a friendly conversation. After a while, you ask something open-ended like "It's been a hard time lately. How are you doing? or "How are you feeling?"

If he or she quickly brushes you off with a denial such as "I'm fine," you could next state your observation, such as "Well, I asked because I noticed you've been keeping to yourself a lot lately." Before the individual has a chance to get defensive, you add—to clarify your role—that you only bring it up because you are concerned, and want to know if there is any way that you can help.

If you can then establish a common perception about the person's behavior (i.e. he or she admits to isolating more than usual), you next ask why, or maybe simply "What's going on?" (If the person continues to deny problems, then you will acknowledge that they say they are doing okay, but ask if you can check in with them later.)

The final step is to respond with a statement that makes it clear that you both heard and understood what you were told, and that you might have some ideas about what might make the person feel or function better.

Coordinate

The Coordinate action in SFA involves getting any additional information and assistance that might be needed. This could involve consulting with and collaborating with others, or informing those who need to know. 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.

Here are a few Coordinate strategies:

- If needed, try to find the most acceptable way to refer someone to EAP or other support, and give them a possible menu of vetted options, rather than telling them to talk to someone.
- Be aware of local and national resources, such as:
 - Peer support teams
 - Local counselors
 - Chaplains
 - Others who have been through similar situations

"We have a contact list with information, and options, so you have names of people you could contact easily." them, and then I actively listen. And once again I'm talking the floodgates open, and it goes well."

NOTE: If an individual indicates that he or she wants to harm themselves or others it should be reported to 911 immediately. Be prepared to provide name, location, and cell phone number. Stay with the individual physically or on line until help arrives. If possible, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 to speak to a crisis counselor.

Cover

To provide Cover means to ensure ongoing safety, usually performed more for others rather than yourself. It can be a momentarily provision of assistance that increases your or another's sense of safety, or it could be a longer-term provision of safety via a greater commitment to organizational safety and order.

One way to open a conversation about Cover is to ask a simple question about the impact on the person's safety, or their preferences for regaining a sense of safety, including:

- How has the incident affected your sense of safety?
- What would help you to feel safe?

Here are a few *self-care* Cover strategies, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Find those people, places, or actions that feel safe to you and call on them when you need to feel more of a sense of safety.
- When you feel unsafe, distract yourself by focusing on something near you or your own breath or thought (i.e., counting).
- Realize that no one is perfect and everyone is going to have strengths and vulnerabilities – be aware of your own.

“To make myself feel more safe, I make contingency plans. I run through what I will do should something happen, for a whole variety of scenarios. It makes me feel better to know I have steps, and a plan, just like fire drills with kids in school. I have the same thing but for so many different scenarios. I just work it out in my head so I know what to do.”

“When I’m in situations where I’m triggered, I try to step away and take a little time to relax, breath, and remind myself that every thing is okay, and it’s a safe situation. It usually works, but not always. It’s not 100%. When it doesn't work, immediately, if I am some place where I’m stuck and I can’t leave, I do my best to get through it, and then as soon as I am able to leave, I practice stress-reducing techniques.”

Here are a few Cover strategies for *use with others*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Slowly implement SFA actions into your organization so it is normal well in advance of anything happening.

- Make it a matter of policy to get people to feeling safe as soon as possible after a difficult work incident.
- Depending on what a person is doing and how they are responding, adjust communication with that person to be more abrupt or directive if it's necessary to keep them safe.
- Educate workers about the physiological response to orange zone stressors (life threat, loss, inner conflict, wear and tear), to minimize the lack of awareness of their own potential stress responses.
- After particularly impactful deaths or incidents, make a particular effort to discuss affected worker needs and preferences.

“Informal “debriefings,” or after-event reviews, are a good way to check on people, and also a good way to make staff feel safe. We've all been through good post-incident discussions and bad ones. The good ones give people the opportunity to learn what is going through the mind of others who were involved, and get a different perspective, without overwhelming people with emotions or making people feel like they have to talk. Ultimately it's execution and facilitation that determines whether these conversations are helpful.”

Email from Facility Director:

“The recent tragic events are continuous reminders of the security threats we face in our country and our facility. There are no easy answers to the current societal forces that perpetuate these threats, but we can take local action to deter, mitigate and lessen the risk. I want to highlight some of the initiatives we have put in place to make this a safer campus for our Veterans, Employees and visitors. These initiatives target limiting after hours building access, deterring people from bringing weapons and drugs into the facility, improving surveillance and providing more effective response to emergencies and threats.

Security is everyone's responsibility. Let us know what is or isn't working. Thanks for all you do every day to serve our Veterans.”

Calm

The goal of the Calm action in SFA is to reduce the intensity of physiological, emotional and behavioral stress. There is overlap between the actions of Cover and Calm, but the difference is that the primary goal of Cover is safety, and Calm actions may have no direct connection with safety.

One way to open a conversation about Calm is to ask a simple question about the need for calming, or their preference for calming actions, including:

- What changes have occurred regarding sleep, feelings of being on edge, or ability to keep calm?
- What usually helps you to calm down?
- What would help you to feel more of a sense of calm?

Here are a few strategies for *calming yourself*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Engage in regular physical activity, yoga, or stretching.
- Spend time with family and close friends, and let them know what is calming for you ahead of time so they can better support you when needed.
- Creative activities to adapt to stressors.
- *Give time* to yourself every day:
 - Taking a walk
 - Listening to guided relaxation or music
 - Doing some deep breathing
 - Looking at photos of family or nature
 - Watching a funny video

Here are a few strategies for *calming others*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Explain what you have done to address similar reactions.
- Find others who have been through similar situations to provide support by mentoring.
- Give information about the context, skills or strategies that make the individual feel more informed and in control.
- Remind others of the importance of self-calming strategies.
- Empower, support and/or engage the other person in distracting activities.
- Acknowledge possible stressors and the potential need for support in a matter of fact way ahead of difficult events, even through humor.
- If a stressed person can't make good decisions, communicate exactly what is needed in a calm, methodical voice.
- After workplace critical incidents, determine next steps for each person on a case-by-case basis.

There will likely be different strategies for different contexts and events. For instance, *for individuals who have suffered a loss*, either on or off the job, these are some suggested strategies from individuals who have dealt with a loss in high-stress jobs:

- If you don't know what to say, stay present, stay quiet and listen. There really is nothing to say, so it's all about the supportive presence you provide.
- Don't try to make a grieving person feel better, because there is no better way to feel at the moment. Just be there.
- When a person does want to talk with you about the loss, don't feel compelled to talk. There are no "magic words." Listen and provide support in the way that you think is going to be most acceptable to the grieving person.
- Check in over the next few months, to see how the individual is doing.
- If the loss affected more than one person, foster a sense of communal grieving with memorials, communal conversations and actions, and other ways to honor the loss, such as memorial funds, scholarships, or donations. Make sure participation is voluntary and that different ways or timelines for coping with loss are honored.

“Our staff experienced a workplace violence fatality, and the staff was allowed to stay. Others were allowed to go home. Sometimes it helps for people to stay around and see what normal looks like, to see someone who is coping well. For some people it's very comforting to see other people who were involved in the situation, and be able to huddle and see how they are. For other people, they can actually make them feel worse if they were severely affected. I really think it is to be a case-by-case.

Usually the person has a sense if they need to go home, but if they don't and you see them really struggling, know the person well enough to know that they need a task or something to do away from the situation or tell him or her to go home to get well rested sure what's coming. For some people it may be the fifth thing that's happened that year, as well as things that happened in their childhood. There may be a whole historical background contributing to how they're reacting today.”

Connect

The Connect action of SFA involves restoring or increasing social support, such as asking for or providing support when you see Orange Zone stress in yourself or others.

One way to open a conversation about Connect is to ask a simple question about the need for connection, or their preference for what is most helpful about connection, including:

- Has there been an impact on how you talk with each other, work morale, or connecting with family and friends?
- Is there someone you feel comfortable talking with about this?
- Has anyone you know done or said something that really helped?

Here are a few strategies for *self-care* related to connecting with others, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Seek out contact with your support system, even if far away
- Be open to different types of support
- Help others
- Maintain normalcy/routine in social activities
- Connect with others around honoring a critical incident, and/or around moving forward and resilience
- Discipline yourself to have conversations people who know you well enough to know when something is bothering you
- Reprioritize your schedule to spend more time with those who mean the most to you

Here are a few strategies for *helping others connect*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Open communication with co-workers
- Electronic support, which is time limited and convenient
- Staff check-ins
- Staff down-time and support
- Staff latitude and flexibility
- Confidence in staff abilities from managers

- Show of caring
- Resilience building training / actions
- Allow staff to check in with families
- If someone has retreated because of an incident, find ways to indirectly include them in projects and create collaborative opportunities with peers, to get them back into doing something meaningful.
- Keep calling, texting, and talking with co-workers involved in a significant loss or traumatic work event. Stress reactions often don't surface for months or even years after an accumulation of events.

“There was a fatality on the ward, and one of the staff felt irrationally responsible for not doing more to stop the death. We rallied around him as much as he would let us. He was a solitary kind of guy before the incident, so it would be normal for his reaction to be one of retreat. A year ago, I would have let him retreat, but because I was introduced to the SFA model, I rallied an effort to help. I included him in discussions and team projects for which I would not have in the past. They benefitted from his expertise, and created collaborative opportunities with peers. It gave us the opportunity to include him, take his temperature from time to time. It redirected his energy to get him back to a sense of competence, confidence and connection, to get him back into doing something that was in his wheelhouse professionally. These actions have all the appearances of being effective.”

Competence

The Competence action of SFA focuses on fostering and restoring a stress-affected person's capacity to function in all his or her important life roles, including occupational, personal, and social domains.

One way to open a conversation about Competence is to ask a simple question about the need for a sense of self-efficacy, or their preference for what is most helpful to regain a sense of self-efficacy, including:

- Do you have any concerns about being able to handle what's going on in your life, deal with your stress reactions, or do your work?
- What are some things that you have done to cope that have been helpful in the past, or have been helpful since this incident?
- How can I/we help you feel more competent at work and/or with self-care?

Here are a few strategies for *building your own sense of competence*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- If you're under too much stress, do something that is easy for you to give you a sense of accomplishment.
- Be more disciplined in taking whatever healthy steps support you in dealing with stress.
- Regularly reflect on the balance between the satisfaction of fulfilling work duties and the personal sacrifices you are making. Be prepared to adjust behaviors and expectations if that balance changes over time.

Here are a few strategies for *building competence in others after critical events* that affect more than one staff member, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Schedule regular morning check ins, and/or debrief regularly.
- Encourage more wellness breaks / time off.
- Schedule helpful trainings, workshops or “lunch and learns.”
- Allow for more flexibility on work scheduling.
- Sensitively address staff concerns.
- Regularly inform staff about organizational actions that help with safety issues or other concerns.
- Promote continual sharing of resources.

Here are a few strategies for *building competence when a person is in the orange or red zone*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Mentor others by figuring out how the person is going to best learn something, and potentially teach the same strategy to others.
- Give the stressed individual responsibility little by little, so that they are more and more in control, to build a past foundation so that when they are in a situation where serious mistakes *could* happen, they know that there is a high likelihood that they will be okay, and if they’re not, it’s not because they didn’t try.
- After mistakes, help the person become more competent, to help with shaken confidence. Remind them that everyone is human, that all reactions are acceptable in the right context, and help them to figure out what they might do differently in the future.
- As a leader, if your staff’s sense of duty and commitment lead to over-working, make sure that they’re getting rest, and advocate for them.
- Before you have a conversation with somebody who you think needs time off, make sure taking time off is acceptable and feasible for that individual.

“I think it goes back to that notion of how important it is to ask people what it is they need. And not just after critical incidents ... I think that managers are key role models and influencers. I can’t highlight enough the importance of paying attention to and encouraging mentorship for those leaders as well.”

“Pretty much everyone I see is burdened by work. We are out taking on more duties as our workforce shrinks and budgets shrink. I think a lot of people will offer “solutions” when they really don't know if those solutions are possible. To say you should take time off may be really tough for someone to do. So before you have a conversation with somebody who you think needs time off you need to make sure that the option is acceptable and feasible for the person.”

Confidence

The Confidence action of SFA may be a more challenging action to implement than the rest of the SFA actions, but it may also have the greatest impact for someone who has lost confidence in themselves or others. The Confidence action involves promoting realistic hope and building self-

esteem that may have been damaged or lost as a result of stress, promoting confidence in core values and beliefs, or bolstering pride and commitment.

One way to open a conversation about Confidence is to ask a simple question about the need for a sense of hope, optimism, or confidence, or their preference for what is most helpful to regain a sense of confidence, including:

- Do you have any changes in your confidence in:
 - Your ability to do your job in the same way as before the incident?
 - Your ability to deal with the ramifications of the incident?
 - The organization / leadership?
- Does this incident hold special meaning or connect with other experiences in any way?
- What could help you to feel more hope / confidence?

Here are a few strategies for *building your own confidence*:

- Use small triumphs to build confidence. If you have self-doubt, talk with mentors, friends, or spiritual guides, or read more self-help books or articles.
- After particularly traumatic situations or losses, don't push yourself to "process" the situation in any particular time frame, but if something triggers you, give yourself time and space to think it through, integrate it, talk to someone, have emotions, find ways to make sure it doesn't cause you to get stuck in suffering, and / or make sense of it.
- Use the wisdom gained from hard experiences to reconfirm your values, make changes in your life, appreciate what you value, or help others.

Here are a few strategies for *building confidence in others after critical events*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- Support each other and remind each other of strengths.
- Focus on values, priorities.
- Take hope in the promises and commitments you've made, and what they say about you.
- Look to learn from each situation.
- Look for any hopeful or meaningful elements of the situation.
- Realize there will always be good days ahead.
- Cultivate hope from within so you can't be shaken from the environment.
- Use faith / beliefs to feel supported in your undertakings.

Here are a few strategies for *building confidence or hope when a person is in the orange or red zone*, gathered from people in high-stress jobs:

- If young staff members are struggling with confidence, give them tasks that they can be successful at, solicit their opinions, set them up for success, or find some way they can contribute to the crew.
- If staff members show severe stress, talk with them, work with them, give them relevant reading materials, and connect them to people who have dealt with similar things. If they continue to get triggered, mentor them to consider their options, including leaving the fire service.

- If a staff member is feeling bad about some reaction he/she had, help them counter their guilt by normalizing their reactions, letting them know that they made the best decision they could have made given what you knew at the time, and letting them know they are not alone in experiencing stress reactions.
- If a staff member's confidence is low, or he/she feels no sense of purpose or contribution to the team, point out a skill they have that does contribute to the team, or one of their other strengths.
- When stress starts to build up in the staff, explain to them why you're doing what you're doing, so they don't lose confidence in the mission or leadership.

“One of our clients took his own life, and one of the staff felt irrationally responsible for not doing more to stop the death. We rallied around her as much as she would let us. She was introverted before the incident, so it would be normal for her reaction to be one of retreat.

A year ago, I would have let her retreat, but because I was introduced to the SFA model, I rallied an effort to help. I included her in discussions and team projects for which I would not have in the past. They benefitted from her expertise, and created collaborative opportunities with peers. It gave us the opportunity to include her, to better take her “well-being temperature” from time to time. It redirected her energy to get her back to a sense of competence, confidence and connection, to get her back into doing something that she felt good about. These actions have all the appearances of being effective.”

SFA Group Educational Format

The SFA model is primarily a one-on-one model, so that it can be more effectively tailored for the needs and priorities of the individual involved. However, in certain circumstances, SFA actions can also be used to structure a group following a stressful event. This use may look similar to a debriefing model in that it systematically uses all the five core SFA actions to lead a discussion, but there are some important differences:

1. No one is required to attend if they don't want to attend, and the group doesn't need to occur within any specific window of time following the event. Those involved should determine the best time for the group.
2. The stressful event is not revisited or described in detail.
3. The discussion is focused on how the event is impacting individuals in the present moment, and into the future, within the SFA frame of five essential human needs (the needs for cover, calm, connectedness, competence, and confidence)

These are some *sample* questions to address the impact of an event. They are not mandatory, and you may pick and choose the questions that best fit the context, and change them as needed to fit the situation and your style of interacting.

- *Cover*: How has the incident affected your sense of safety?
- *Calm*: What changes have occurred regarding sleep, feelings of being on edge, or ability to keep calm? What helps?
- *Connection*: Has there been an impact on how you talk with each other, work morale, or connecting with family and friends? Is there someone you feel comfortable talking with about

this? Has anyone you know done or said something that really helped? Does anyone here feel the need for any practical support right now?

- *Competence*: Do you have any concerns about being able to handle what's going on in your life, deal with your stress reactions, or do your work? What are some things that you have done to cope that have been helpful in the past, or have been helpful since this incident?
- *Confidence*: Have you noticed any change in your confidence in your ability to do your job in the same way as before the event, or your confidence in leadership? Are you feeling guilty or wish you had done something differently? Does this incident hold special meaning or connect with other experiences in any way? What can we learn from this event?

After the discussion prompted by the questions, you can include a short discussion about the importance of being particularly disciplined in self-care and looking out for each other for a period of time, including participating in more healthy forms of coping, being diligent about getting enough sleep by reducing any distractions that one can control, minimizing negative coping (such as isolation, using alcohol or substances to sleep), and making use of available resources. Finally, ask if there is any other support they need.

Summary

SFA actions are to be used *as needed* for yourself or with coworkers who are experiencing either significant distress or decrements in functioning. They should be incorporated into duties in a natural, seamless way, and implemented *only* when needed. The table on the next page gives a summary of actions you could take to provide each of the seven SFA core actions.

SFA ACTIONS	POSSIBLE STRATEGIES
Continuous SFA Actions	
Check	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current level of distress and functioning • Assess immediate risks • Assess need for additional SFA interventions or higher levels of care • Reassess progress
Coordinate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide who else should be informed of the situation • Refer for further evaluation or higher levels of care, if indicated • Facilitate access to other needed care
As Needed SFA Actions	
Cover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure immediate physical safety of stress-affected person and others • Foster a psychological sense of safety • Protect the person from additional stress
Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce physiological arousal (slow heart rate and breathing, relax) • Reduce intensity of negative emotions such as fear or anger • Listen empathically to the person talk about his or her experiences • Give information that calms
Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be a support, or encourage a connection to supportive others • Help the person problem-solve to remove obstacles to social support • Foster positive social activities and practical support
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help mentor the person back to full functioning • Facilitate rewarding work roles and retraining, if necessary • Help the person problem-solve ways to deal with their own stress reactions • Encourage gradual re-exposure to potentially stressful situations
Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor the person back to full confidence in self, leadership, and/or core values • Discuss any obstacles to confidence, such as the person’s sense of guilt or anger, and if possible, shift them to a lessons learned perspective • Find out how the person makes meaning regarding their experiences, or connect them with someone who can

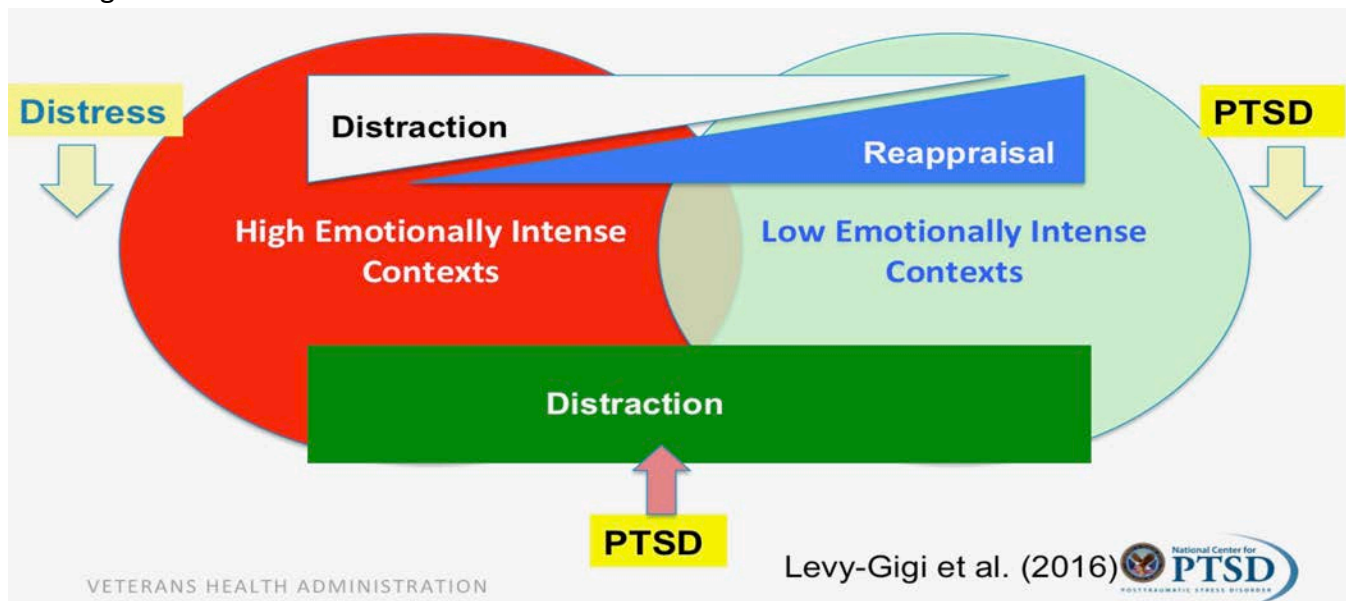
Adapted from: Watson, P., Gist, R., Taylor, V. Evlander, E., Leto, F., Martin, R., Vaught, D., Nash, W.P., Westphal, R., & Litz, B. (2013). Stress First Aid for Firefighters and Emergency Services Personnel. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Self-Care Cognitive Strategies Should be Flexible

In research with first responders who had repeated duty-related traumatic exposure:

- Those who could flexibly switch from distraction to reappraisal depending on the circumstances showed no PTSD related to exposure to repeated traumatic stress.
- Those with poor regulatory flexibility had significantly more PTSD symptoms related to exposure to repeated traumatic stress.

This research has shown that In emotionally intense contexts, distraction appears to more successfully reduce negativity and distress via blocking emotional information processing with independent neutral thoughts. However, once an individual is in less emotionally intense contexts, distraction and reappraisal can reduce negativity, but only reappraisal allows for emotional processing, which is important for long-term adaptation. If a person relies only on distraction and don't also use reappraisal to process what has happened to them emotionally, they are more likely to have symptoms of PTSD in the long run.



The common disengagement strategies firefighters use include:

- Disengaging attention from emotional processing
- Directing attention away from emotional information with neutral thoughts
- Focusing on work
- Helping Others
- Drinking
- Talking about other things
- Humor
- Engaging activities

The reappraisal strategies firefighters use include *trauma focus* coping strategies engage with the traumatic event, such as:

- Fully experiencing the event's cognitive and emotional significance
- Making meaning of what happened
- Integrating the event into their self-concept
- Reminding themselves why they do the work even if it is hard
- Thinking realistically and remaining focused on the event
- Reducing normal social obligations
- Spending time alone
- Facing the grim reality head on
- Attending to emotional information but reinterpreting its negative meaning
- Remembering the details of the event
- Letting self fully experience some of painful emotions linked with the event
- Reflecting on the meaning of the event
- Paying attention to the distressing feelings that result

Reappraisal strategies also include *forward focus* coping strategies foster disengagement from the event, such as:

- Maintaining previous goals and plans
- Caring for others
- Reducing painful emotions
- Focusing on the fact that even if one was in a life-threatening situation, when they get triggered by reminders, they are now safe
- Using distraction and amusement.
- Reminding self that things will get better
- Staying focused on current goals and plans
- Looking for a silver lining
- Trying to lessen the experience of painful emotions
- Keeping schedule and activities as constant as possible
- Distracting self to keep from thinking about event
- Being able to laugh
- Finding activities to help keep the event off ones mind
- Enjoying something you would normally find funny or amusing
- Keeping self serious and calm
- Focusing attention on / care for the needs of other people
- Comforting other people
- Altering daily routines

Levy-Gigi, E., Bonanno, G. A., Shapiro, A. R., Richter-Levin, G., Kéri, S., & Sheppes, G. (2016). Emotion regulatory flexibility sheds light on the elusive relationship between repeated traumatic exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Clinical psychological science*, 4(1), 28-39.