



Use of Psychological First Aid in Mental Trauma Type Situations

Catastrophic Aircraft (Airline) Accident Type Scenario





Overview - Psychological First Aid - **PFA**

What is Psychological First Aid?

PFA is an 'evidence informed' approach for assisting appropriately 'affected' persons in the immediate aftermath of a major traumatic occurrence. *It is targeted at reducing the adverse impacts of initial psychological distress caused by such occurrence - and fostering / facilitating shorter and longer term adaptive functioning* (recovery)

PFA was particularly designed for '**in the field delivery**' type scenarios - typically utilised anywhere where psychological trauma victims might be found e.g. crash / accident / disaster sites, shelters / refuges, staging areas, hospitals, other community settings etc. Such delivery facilitates the application of simple and practical administration

Principles and techniques of PFA meet four basic **standards**:

- Consistent with research evidence on risk and resilience following psychological trauma
- Applicable and practical in all settings - but particularly for 'in the field delivery'
- Appropriate to further development across the lifespan of such intervention - and
- Culturally informed and adaptable in most circumstances

PFA can be delivered by qualified mental health specialists embedded in a variety of response units - including first responder teams, primary & emergency health care providers, faith-based organisations, disaster relief organisations etc. However, one of its major strengths is that it can also be delivered by appropriately trained and exercised laypersons - ***including members of airline 'Humanitarian Assistance Teams (HAT) and similar / equivalent'***

The primary **objectives** of PFA are to:

- Establish a human connection in an unobtrusive & culturally sensitive way
- Provide safety and security - both physical and emotional
- Calm and guide / orient the emotionally overwhelmed or distraught
- Help affected persons to specify their immediate needs
- Offer immediate practical assistance & information
- Connect affected persons to appropriate psychosocial support organisations / networks
- Provide information to help reduce stress reactions
- Support and encourage adaptive coping behaviors (self-help)
- Facilitate on-going continuity in associated / related efforts
- Withdraw from PFA at the appropriate time - providing notice, reasons, next steps etc.

The core PFA skill is '**active listening**', which lies at the heart of most psychological therapeutic techniques. Participants in PFA programmes report that gaining listening skills improves not only their psychological supporting, but also their personal & professional relationships / communications





Setting the Scene

Before looking specifically at the application of PFA in the fairly narrow confines of a catastrophic aircraft accident type situation, a brief look at the 'bigger picture' might serve to 'set the scene'

Take for example some form of major, natural disaster (hurricane; earthquake; drought, large-scale fires etc.) which both kills and injures people (in significant numbers) and also (possibly temporarily) deprives surviving victims of e.g. what they need to live (e.g. shelter, food, water etc.); how they need to live (health; security; communications; employment; money; transport); emotional support / stability etc.

Suddenly, such surviving victims (for the sake of this information article we shall assume that such victims are physically **un**injured) have gone from what is termed 'normality' - to a state of exhaustion, stress, confusion and a bleak outlook for the future. They could now find themselves 100% dependent on the 'authorities' / disaster relief organisations / whoever - for the most basic of life's requirements - such as e.g. water, food, * shelter, blankets etc.

* Albeit possibly being in e.g. a school gymnasium [indoors], sports arena outdoors - (think [Hurricane Katrina / New Orleans](#) for the latter)

What are their needs? How do they feel? and what, in such situation, could be done to start them on the journey back to 'normality' (albeit possibly a new type of normality) as soon as possible?

Until relatively recently, the '**needs**' referred to above would have been typically defined in **practical, material** terms. Disaster experts, civil planners etc. (at least in the more developed countries) might have begun working on where surviving victims might be accommodated in the relatively longer term, until e.g. replacement homes could be rebuilt. They would also have prepared and implemented plans for such re-building

However, (and again, until relatively recently), attending to the **emotional** and **psychosocial** needs of such victims might have been a minor consideration or (more likely) not a consideration at all

With the relatively recent advent (better understanding) of disaster etc. related mental health type issues - and the eventual identification of what is now known as **PTSD** (post-traumatic stress disorder) and equivalents, things began to change

For example, PFA (amongst other psychological trauma 'treatment / coping' strategies) was developed as a principal tool to use in circumstances such as those already described further above, and similar - including (amongst others) mass fatality transport related incidents

Today, it (PFA) constitutes a significant aspect of responding to major destructive / disruptive etc. type events





Why Use PFA?

Since PTSD (and similar) was 'officially' recognised as a psychological disorder, there has been steadily increasing acknowledgement (by 'those that know') that 'the wellbeing of surviving victims of psychological trauma' should be tended to (in a similar manner conceptually, morally and ethically) as physical trauma

Mental health experts also generally agree that **early** (and appropriate) intervention can prevent more serious mental health problems later. An accompanying assertion states that **most** people are 'resilient' enough, especially if given appropriate and **timely** (early) psychosocial support, to eventually revert to being "normal" - **without** additional, **specialised** mental health type interventions (such as long-term counselling, psychiatric services etc.)

One form of 'timely, psychosocial support' is delivered via use of PFA

Over the fairly recent past (say last 10-20 years or so going backwards from 2019) - and for a number of reasons, this (PFA) has today almost certainly become the first such treatment of choice

Until PFA gained this 'status', the previous, preferred method typically used was an intervention known as 'Critical Incident Stress (Management) Debriefing - CISD'. For a number of reasons currently under further research (and not further expanded upon here) CISD is now felt by many 'in the know' to be largely **ineffective** at what it is trying to achieve and, by a lesser number, to actually **do harm** (with regard to successful, early interventions into PTSD type mental trauma)

Further studies are taking place on the efficacy or otherwise of CISD interventions

What does Psychological First Aid Need to Accomplish?

Because major traumatic events differ greatly in type and / or scope - any 'model' used for associated psychological intervention needs to be **flexible and adaptable** to specific circumstances 'on the day'

The five **principles** (which we know today as the **framework** for PFA) state that psychosocial support provided (in the following hours and days post psychological trauma) needs to promote:

- Safety
- Calmness
- Self-empowerment
- Connectedness
- Hope

These principles provide a flexible and adaptable framework for developing the 'general' public health approach to disaster etc. response - which is gradually being incorporated into associated PFA programmes worldwide





Use of PFA in the Catastrophic Aircraft Accident Type Scenario

Whilst a 'disaster is a disaster is a disaster' from the viewpoint of providing PFA type interventions, the **catastrophic aircraft accident** type situation raises certain, potentially difficult issues which might not be considered and / or applicable and / or available in other circumstances. In no particular order such issues include:

- Aircraft accidents can occur absolutely anywhere in the world - including extremely remote and / or hostile (environmentally, physically, personally etc.) locations
- 'Assistance' might take hours (or, in extremis, days) to 'arrive' in situ
- Large numbers of **victims** might be involved e.g. 2 x Airbus A380 aircraft colliding over a major city could lead to thousands of 'casualties' ('Victims' being those on board the accident flight itself and / or those on the ground killed, injured or otherwise 'traumatised' as a direct result of the accident aircraft [or its parts] hitting the ground)
- Huge number of potential '**Family, Relatives & Friends - FR**' (of victims involved) - probably located all over the world. (IMPORTANT - such FR are typically **not** classified by airlines as accident victims - although they should still be adequately 'cared for' of course)
- Many differing languages, religions, customs, cultures, practices etc. - for both victims & FR
- In some circumstances, the only organisation capable of providing **initial** PFA will be the airline (and / or its agents) itself
- Larger and / or well-resourced airlines recruit, train and exercise their own 'humanitarian assistance' teams (HAT). HAT members are typically trained to deliver PFA
- Other airlines can engage (hire) third party (commercial) specialists to act as their HAT
- Many (if not most) airlines around the world have no HAT (and thus no PFA) capability. This is typically because they do not care enough and / or have insufficient resources - particularly money (think developing countries!)
- It is perfectly feasible (probably most likely) that surviving air accident victims - and / or their FR - will eventually 'sue' the accident airline (for damages, loss etc.) in a court of law. Thus the airline provision of PFA must be very carefully managed to avoid such provision (particularly the way in which it was [or perhaps was not!] provided / delivered) being adversely used against it in such legal jurisdiction

More Information

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_first_aid

http://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/

http://www.redcross.org.au/files/Psychological_First_Aid_An_Australian_Guide.pdf

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/psych_firstaid_manual.asp

