

Community-Based Psychological First Aid Toolkit



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Acknowledgements



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International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) is a knowledge organisation that supports and develops initiatives in the field of early childhood education, child protection and well-being.

www.icdi.nl



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Project Partners



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INTRODUCTION

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a simple, practical way to support people in distress during or after difficult moments, when they feel upset or stressed, or in more serious situations such as emergencies or sudden changes in daily life.

This toolkit introduces PFA for use in community settings. The toolkit is designed for and can be used by those supporting others in their communities, including teachers, youth workers, coaches, facilitators, and community members. It aims to strengthen everyday support skills without replacing professional services.

The toolkit was developed as part of the **Mind the Future** programme, a 3-year, innovative programme aiming to intervene in and contribute to systemic change in Ukraine's mental health services sector by enhancing the effectiveness and reach of local mental health services for vulnerable youth affected by the ongoing war. The target groups of the programme are vulnerable and marginalised youth (12 - 26 years old), local mental health service providers, educators, and community members. The programme is implemented by a consortium of partners, consisting of ICDI, Labour and Health Social Initiatives (LHSI), PRO-FIL, and De Veranderkamer.

The toolkit includes:

- Understanding PFA and its boundaries
- Adapting support to different situations
- Practising skills through simple activities

These activities are easy to use, require few materials, and support safe and engaging group learning.



1. PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA)



WHAT PFA IS

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a practical way to support someone in distress during and after a difficult event.

It focuses on:

- Being there, giving full attention, and listening
- Helping people feel safe
- Connecting people to support



WHAT PFA IS NOT

- PFA is not therapy
- PFA is not counselling
- PFA does not involve diagnosing

The fundamental principle:

DO NO HARM

Providing PFA does not require being a professional; anyone can offer support using simple skills such as listening, staying calm, and helping others feel safe. Just as with physical first aid - where you might clean a wound, apply a bandage, or seek further help without being a professional - there are simple, practical ways to support someone in distress.

PFA can be provided by adults, including teachers, youth workers, and trained volunteers. Through peer support, young people can also play an important role in supporting others, as they are often the first to notice when a friend or peer is struggling.

In this context, PFA does not fix problems. Instead, it means recognising signs of potential struggle, listening carefully, and offering support to help find solutions, including seeking additional help if necessary.

The actions you take in PFA depend on the situation and the needs of the people you are helping. In practice, it is guided by three core action principles: Look, Listen, and Link.



1.1 Look - Listen - Link

These principles guide you through the process of observing needs, listening empathetically, and connecting individuals with practical help.



I. Look

Helping starts with observation. Take a moment to understand the situation and identify who might need support.

OBSERVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Notice those who seem to be struggling. Look for both withdrawn (quiet) and disruptive (agitated) behaviours to determine who needs support first.

APPROACH CALMLY

Move towards the person calmly. Approach from a direction they can see you coming from, so you don't startle them.

ENSURE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Look around to make sure the area is calm and feels safe both for you and the other person.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF

Simply share your name and explain why you are approaching (e.g. "Hi, I'm [name], I'm a volunteer here. I just wanted to check if you are okay."). If they don't want to talk, respect their space and pace; sometimes just staying nearby is enough.

CHECK FOR URGENT PHYSICAL NEEDS

See if the person needs immediate practical support, such as a glass of water, a quiet place to sit, or a warm coat.

OBTAIN CONSENT AND BUILD TRUST

Ask whether they want to talk or seek support. Assure them that your conversation is confidential; personal information will remain private and will not be shared without permission. However, explain that if there is a serious risk of harm to themselves or others, or if there are concerns about abuse, violence, or serious safety issues, you will need to involve a trusted person or professional to keep everyone safe.



II. Listen

Active listening is essential for this step; it means paying full attention to the person to help them feel heard and supported.

PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

Pay close attention and listen without interrupting, allowing the person to share their story at their own pace. Don't force them to share details if they aren't ready.

ASK ABOUT NEEDS AND CONCERNS

Use simple, clear questions to understand what is most important to them right now.

ACCEPT OTHERS' FEELINGS

Listen without judgment or criticism, and avoid telling the person how they should feel.

SUPPORT PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Help the person find simple, immediate solutions to their most urgent needs and problems.

CALM THE PERSON IN DISTRESS

Use a soft tone of voice and remain patient and steady to help the person feel more grounded.



III. Link

Linking is about connecting people to reliable information and the practical support they need to start feeling in control again.

PROVIDE ACCURATE OR UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION

Share only facts you are certain of to reduce uncertainty. If you don't know the answer, find someone who does and avoid overpromising.

ADDRESS PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

Focus on small, manageable steps to help the person tackle immediate needs, such as finding a safe place to rest or accessing supplies. Offer choices rather than making decisions for them to help them regain a sense of autonomy.

CONNECT WITH LOVED ONES

Help the person reach out to family, friends, or other trusted support networks to help them feel more secure.

ACCESS FURTHER HELP

If a person's needs exceed basic support, connect them with a trusted person or professional, such as a local health services, social worker, teacher, or school counsellor.

1.2 PFA in Action: Sofia's Story

To better understand how these principles work, here is a real-life example of PFA in practice: Sofia is in distress after witnessing a major car accident. A peer recognises her distress and intervenes.

PEER

Hey Sofia, I noticed you've been sitting here alone for a while and you look a bit shaken up. Is it okay if I sit with you for a moment?

SOFIA

I... I'm not sure. Everything just feels a bit blurry right now. That accident outside was just so loud.

PEER

It's completely normal to feel that way; it was a huge shock for everyone. You are safe here now. Would you like a sip of water or just to sit quietly for a second?

SOFIA

(Takes a breath) Water would be good, thanks. My heart is still racing.

PEER

A racing heart is a very normal reaction to stress. You don't have to tell me exactly what happened if you don't want to. Is there anything specific on your mind right now that I can help with?

SOFIA

I'm supposed to meet my sister, but I think I dropped my phone when I ran. I don't know how to reach her.

PEER

I can help with that. You can use my phone to call her, or I can walk back with you to look for yours if you feel up to it. Which would you prefer?

SOFIA

Could I just use your phone? I don't want to go back there yet.

PEER

Of course. After you talk to her, maybe we can walk over to the office so you are okay. I'll check in with you tomorrow morning just to see how you're feeling, alright?

SOFIA

That sounds good. Thank you for staying with me.

2. INCLUSION AND RESPECTING DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

Everyone's experiences and backgrounds are different. When providing PFA, it is important to be curious and open, and to try to understand everyone's unique situation and needs. To make your support inclusive and ensure the person feels comfortable, you can use these practical approaches:

KEEP THE WORDING SIMPLE

Use everyday language such as "I'm here to listen" rather than technical terms.

ADAPT TO DIFFERENT NEEDS

Speak slowly if there are language barriers or face the person directly if they have hearing difficulties.

CHECK UNDERSTANDING

Ask "Does this make sense?" or "Should I explain it another way?"

PRIORITISE COMFORT AND SAFETY

Ask: "What would make you feel safest right now?" (e.g. if they would prefer to talk to someone of a specific gender or move to a quieter space).

RESPECT FAMILY ROLES

Avoid assuming family support; ask: "Is there someone you usually turn to when things feel difficult?"



3. ACTIVITIES

The following activities are for practising the Core Action Principles:

LOOK



LISTEN



LINK



This includes all related aspects such as safety, ethics, and inclusive communication. These exercises are flexible and can be adapted for workshops, classrooms, or community settings.



FACILITATOR'S NOTE ON PLANNING

For a 60 to 90-minute session, we recommend choosing at least:

- 1 warm-up exercise (5-10 min)
- 1 activity for each Action Principle (Look, Listen, Link - 15 min each)
- 1 final reflection (15-20 min)

Ensure your session is accessible and that everyone feels comfortable participating. Be ready to adjust activities before or during the session to meet your group's specific needs. For example, if an exercise involves standing or walking, you can easily adapt it for participants with mobility issues by ensuring it can be done while seated. You should always allow extra space and time for those who have difficulty speaking or need more time to express themselves. Keep the focus on the experience, as participation and reflection are more important than getting every step "perfect".

In addition, ensure you leave enough time for reflection after each activity. Reflection is as important as the activity itself; it is where participants process what they experienced and connect it to their own lives. As a facilitator, your role is to create a space where everyone feels encouraged to contribute to the dialogue. Each activity (except the warm-up) includes two guiding questions: one focused on the experience and the other on transfer to real life. These are starting points; the conversation that follows will naturally deepen, depending on the group's responses and the time available. To close each reflection, briefly summarise what came up and connect it back to Look, Listen, and Link for the activity. For more detailed strategies on facilitating dialogue, please refer to the ***Facilitator's Manual***.

How to Read an Activity Card

Activity number and name

Icon for action principles:
LOOK, LISTEN, and LINK

TOOLKIT PFA • ACTIVITY 02

LOOK 

02 Mirror & Move

Objective



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants notice and follow others and to practice paying attention to others.



DURATION
10-15 minutes



MATERIALS
No materials required

Preparation:
duration and materials



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask participants to pair up with the person next to them or someone they choose, whichever works best for the group.
- One person is the leader, the other is the mirror.
- The leader moves slowly (hands, arms, face) and the mirror follows as closely as possible.
- After 1–2 minutes, switch roles.
- You can suggest simple themes to help participants slow down and feel more comfortable, such as moving in slow motion or mimicking daily actions (e.g. brushing teeth, putting on shoes).

Step by step
activity guide



REFLECTION

- "What did you notice about your partner that helped you follow them along?"
- "When supporting someone in distress, how might this kind of careful observation help you?"

➤ Looking comes first; it tells you who needs help and how to approach them. In PFA, what you observe before you speak shapes how you help. This exercise helps you see that noticing others is not just about seeing; it is about tuning in to how someone moves, reacts, and engages before any words are exchanged.

Reflection and
guiding questions



ACTIVITIES

01

Warm-Up & Getting to Know Each Other



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants feel comfortable, get to know each other, and create a safe, engaging group environment



DURATION

10-15 minutes



MATERIALS

No materials required



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

Choose one or more of the following short games based on the time available and energy level of the group.

1. Names & Favorites

- Each participant says their name and something they like. The facilitator can define a category (e.g. fruit, food, hobby) or leave it open.
- After everyone shares, the facilitator says only one item (e.g. "apple"), and the group tries to remember who said it.

2. Name Ordering

- Participants move around and talk to each other.
- They arrange themselves in alphabetical order by name.
- Then they repeat by birth date.
- Focus on interaction and fun - not perfection.

3. Counting Game

- Participants stand or sit in a circle.
- The group counts from 1 to 5, one number at a time, in any order.
- If two people speak at the same time, the group starts again.

4. Do as I Say

- The facilitator gives directions while performing a different activity and participants follow the instructions, not the actions.
- When participants follow the action instead of the instruction, they are out.
- Examples:
 - Say: "Hands on your head." → Do: put your hands on your shoulders.
 - Say: "Touch your nose" → Do: touch your ear.
 - Say: "Hands on your knees" → Do: cross your arms.

02 Mirror & Move



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

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DURATION

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MATERIALS

No materials required



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask participants to pair up with the person next to them or someone they choose, whichever works best for the group.
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- You can suggest simple themes to help participants slow down and feel more comfortable, such as moving in slow motion or mimicking daily actions (e.g. brushing teeth, putting on shoes).



REFLECTION

- *“What did you notice about your partner that helped you follow them along?”*
- *“When supporting someone in distress, how might this kind of careful observation help you?”*

➤ Looking comes first; it tells you who needs help and how to approach them. In PFA, what you observe before you speak shapes how you help. This exercise helps you see that noticing others is not just about seeing; it is about tuning in to how someone moves, reacts, and engages before any words are exchanged.

03 What Did You Notice?



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants understand how focusing on one thing can cause us to miss other things happening around us.



DURATION

10-15 minutes



MATERIALS

A short video (1–2 minutes) that you need to focus on.
(Example used in the activity:

[Video 1: Selective Attention Test, Gorilla](#)) OR

[Video 2: Colour Changing Card Trick-watch from 0:00 to 0:50](#)).



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Tell participants that they'll watch a short video.
- Give them a specific task before viewing:
 - "Count how many times the ball is passed between the players in white shirts." (Video 1)
 - "Watch carefully and follow the card trick." (Video 2)
- Play the video.
- After the video, ask:
 - "What number did you get?" (Video 1)
 - "Did the trick work on you?" (Video 2)
 - Then ask: "Did you notice anything unusual?"
- Reveal that something unexpected happened (e.g., a person in a gorilla suit walks through the scene/the magician's shirt, the tablecloth, and the background curtain all changed colour).



REFLECTION

- "What did you miss while you were focused on counting and why?" (Video 1)
- "What changed without you noticing and why?" (Video 2)
- "When supporting someone, what might you miss if you concentrate too much on a single aspect?"

► This activity shows that intense focus can sometimes make us overlook our surroundings. In this toolkit, "Looking" means training ourselves to see the whole picture. When noticing someone in distress, we must also remain mindful of the environment to ensure everyone's safety and well-being.

04 Notice & Approach



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants recognise when someone might need support and practice a simple, respectful way to approach them.



DURATION

10-15 minutes



MATERIALS

No materials required



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Divide participants into two groups.
- Group A: Stay in the space and act naturally. If needed, the facilitator may quietly suggest simple situations, such as:
 - Sitting alone.
 - Avoiding eye contact.
 - Looking confused or unsure.
 - Staying quiet.
 - Not joining the group.
- Group B: Work in pairs and observe the group. Take a moment to look around before approaching anyone.
- Invite all pairs to share what they observed as a group. Then decide who to approach.
- Approach gently:
 - Keep a comfortable distance.
 - Stand slightly to the side.
 - Use a calm and natural tone.
- Introduce yourself briefly and start with a simple check-in, such as: "You seemed a bit [quiet/stressed/lost in thought]. Is everything okay? Do you need anything?"
- Respect the response: if the person does not want to engage, thank them and step back.



REFLECTION

- *"What made you decide to approach someone or to hold back?"*
- *"What would you do differently next time you notice someone who might need support?"*

➤ Noticing someone is only the first step. This activity shows how our approach, distance, tone, and respect for a "no" builds trust. "Looking" helps us see the need, and "Approaching" respectfully is how we begin to help safely.



05 The Noise vs. The Voice



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants recognise how distractions (e.g. phones, side conversations, interruptions) impact someone's ability to feel heard, and to help participants understand the difference between being distracted and really listening.



DURATION

10-15 minutes



MATERIALS

No materials required



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask for one volunteer to be the "Storyteller" and place them at the front.
- While the storyteller prepares a short story (e.g. a happy memory), quietly brief the rest of the group:
 - They will act as "noise" (e.g. whispering, pretending to check their phones, lightly interrupting). Remind them to keep it subtle and respectful, not loud or overwhelming.
- The storyteller begins speaking while the group acts distracted.
- After a short moment, give a clear signal (e.g. clap). The group immediately becomes fully attentive (silent, eye contact, focused listening).
- The storyteller finishes their story.



REFLECTION

- *"How did it feel when the room shifted from distracted to fully attentive?"*
- *"What is one thing you could remove or change to listen more effectively in your daily life?"*

➤ In PFA, "Listening" is how we truly understand what someone needs. By removing distractions, we not only understand their feelings more clearly but also encourage them to continue sharing. When someone feels heard, they are more likely to open up, which helps us provide the right support.



06 Telephone (Whisper Chain)



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants see how easily messages can change when we don't listen carefully and to emphasise the importance of listening carefully when supporting others.



DURATION

10-15 minutes



MATERIALS

No materials required



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask participants to stand or sit in a line or circle.
- Whisper a short message to the first participant, such as a simple sentence or a short story, for example:
 - "I went to the market to buy a bag of red apples and a bunch of yellow bananas."
 - "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog."
- Each participant whispers the message to the next person only once.
- Remind them to:
 - Speak quietly.
 - Listen carefully.
 - Say it only once.
- The final participant says the message aloud; compare it with the original message.
- To enhance the experience, you can:
 - Use a slightly longer message.
- Add small distractions (e.g. background noise).



REFLECTION

- *"Where did the message start to change and what caused it?"*
- *"If we act on a message we misheard, what is the risk to the person we are trying to help?"*

➤ In PFA, "Listening" means getting the facts right. This activity shows how easily information can be distorted. To avoid this, we should always use simple, clear questions to confirm what we heard. Listening accurately ensures we provide help based on reality, not on our own assumptions.



07 Active Listening



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants experience what it feels like to be listened to and to recognise how body language shows attention and support.



DURATION

15-20 minutes



MATERIALS

No materials required



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask participants to form pairs.
- One person shares a simple story (e.g., a happy memory) while the other listens without speaking or interrupting, showing attention through body language such as eye contact, nodding, and facial expressions.
- After a few minutes, switch roles.
- Bring the group together and ask:
 - "How did it feel to have someone's full attention?"
 - "How could you tell the other person was listening?"
- Briefly explore the opposite by asking:
 - "What happens when someone is distracted or not really listening?"



REFLECTION

- *"How did it feel to have someone's full attention and how could you tell they were really listening?"*
- *"What is one thing you could do differently to stay more present when someone is speaking to you?"*

► In PFA, being present is a form of support. This activity shows how we sit, look, and respond, telling the other person we are truly there for them. This creates a safe space that encourages them to keep sharing. When we stay focused, we can better understand their situation and the help they are seeking.



08 our Community Map



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants identify safe and less safe places in their environment, recognise trusted people and resources, and understand where to seek help.



DURATION

15-25 minutes



MATERIALS

- Paper (plain or with a simple sketch of the neighbourhood or school)
- Pens, crayons, or markers
- Optional: stickers or coloured paper



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Divide participants into small groups (5–7 people).
- Give each group a piece of paper (plain or with a simple sketch of the neighbourhood/school).
- Ask participants to draw or complete the map by adding places they know (e.g. school, home, streets, community spaces).
- Ask them to colour the places:
 - Green = safe.
 - Orange = not sure.
 - Red = less safe.
- Ask participants to add:
 - People they trust.
 - Places or services where they could go for help.
- Encourage them to use symbols, drawings, or notes.
- If necessary, gently encourage participants to think about options that might not come to mind right away. For instance, they might not always recognise certain people (like teachers or school staff) as sources of support. Urge them to consider who else around them could assist.
- (Optional) Invite groups to briefly share:
 - One place they marked, from whichever category they felt comfortable sharing.
 - One person or resource they added



REFLECTION

- *"What makes a place feel safe to you and what do the orange and red areas on your map tell you?"*
- *"When helping someone, why is it important to understand which places they consider safe or unsafe?"*

➤ In PFA, "Linking" means finding the most effective way to connect someone with the resources they need. This map shows where support is available and highlights the "red" areas where people might not feel safe or comfortable. Knowing which options feel safe and accessible ensures that the support we suggest is practical and realistic for the person.



09 Community Map



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants know who they can turn to and where they can find support during stressful times.



DURATION

20-25 minutes



MATERIALS

- Flipchart or plain paper
- Coloured markers
- Optional: post-it notes



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask participants to draw three circles (each inside the other).
- Explain the circles:
 - Inner circle: people close to you (e.g. friends, family).
 - Middle circle: people in your daily environment (e.g. teachers, community members).
 - Outer circle: professional support (e.g. services, NGOs, helplines).
- Ask participants to fill in each circle with names or places they know.
- If needed, encourage them to think of people they might not think of right away and consider who else around them could offer support.
- Ask participants to look at their map and draw:
 - Solid green lines for people or resources they feel comfortable reaching out to.
 - Dotted red lines for people or resources that they would be hesitant to reach out to.



REFLECTION

- *"Which circle was the hardest to fill in and what does that tell you?"*
- *"What makes it difficult to reach out to the people or resources on your red dotted lines?"*

➤ In PFA, "Linking" means connecting people with the right support. This map shows that help takes many forms, from a friend to a professional service. Knowing these options helps us guide someone to the specific kind of help they need at that moment.



10

Spot & Support (Scenario-Based)



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

To help participants notice signs of distress (LOOK), practice approaching and listening (LISTEN), and consider how to offer support or connect someone with help (LINK).



DURATION

20-25 minutes



MATERIALS

- Printed or read-aloud scenarios (visuals not needed)
- Optional: LOOK – LISTEN – LINK visuals on the wall



HOW TO DO THIS ACTIVITY

- Briefly introduce LOOK – LISTEN – LINK and display the visuals.

Read Scenario 1 aloud:

- "You are sitting in a park or school yard with your friends. A bit further away, you notice someone your age sitting alone and crying. Others around continue talking and do not seem to notice."
- Ask:
 - "What do you notice?"
 - "Do you think this person might need support? Why?"

Read Scenario 2 aloud:

- "A friend who is usually cheerful has recently been receiving negative comments online. Over time, you notice they are quieter, less active, and no longer join activities they used to enjoy."
- Ask:
 - "What has changed?"
 - "How would you approach this person?"

**Read Scenario 3 aloud:**

- "During a group activity, one participant suddenly becomes very quiet and withdrawn. When someone tries to talk to them, they say, "I'm fine" but avoid eye contact and stop participating. Later, you hear them mention they have not been sleeping well and feel overwhelmed."
- Ask:
 - "What do you notice?"
 - "What would you do in this moment?"
 - "If they don't want to talk, what else could you do?"
 - "Who else could help in this situation?"
- Throughout the activity, connect responses to LOOK – LISTEN – LINK by briefly highlighting:
 - LOOK → recognising signs.
 - LISTEN → approaching and listening carefully.
 - LINK → asking for help from others if needed.

**REFLECTION**

- *"What helped you decide how to respond in each scenario?"*
- *"How will you approach situations differently now that you have practised Look, Listen, and Link?"*

➤ PFA is a practical tool designed for use when needed. It provides a clear structure to help you stay calm and effective in difficult situations. By using Look, Listen, and Link, you can organise your response and ensure that the support you provide is focused, realistic, and safe for everyone involved. This structure ensures you have a clear plan to follow whenever you encounter someone in distress.