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HRVATSKO PSIHIJATRIJSKO DRUŠTVO
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Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) Pandemic and Psychological First Aid - Recommendations for First- liners

- In crisis situations, those who assist usually are family members, neighbours, members of the wider community, as well as volunteers and members of the emergency medical service, police officers, firefighters and the like.
- Social support is essential for maintaining psychological stability in crisis, many even might need psychological first aid
- **Psychological first aid (PFA)** is a humane response to another human being who is suffering and in need of help. It focuses on practical forms of assistance through needs assessment on a personal level and beyond.

How to provide psychological first aid?

- Psychological first aid has four basic principles:
 - ✓ **Prepare:** Be as informed as possible of all relevant information provided by the National Civil Protection Headquarters (hereinafter referred to as Headquarters) and the Ministry of Health on the epidemic; inquire about available services and support; find out as much as possible about security.
 - ✓ **Look:** Monitor the level of security, who's basic needs must be met urgently and who has severe stress reactions
 - ✓ **Listen:** Contact people who need help, ask them about their needs and problems, listen to them and help them to calm down.
 - ✓ **Link:** Help people express their basic needs and help them to access important services; help people cope with their problems, provide information, connect them with their loved ones and with available social support systems

Key elements of PFA

- ✓ **Safety** - increase immediate and further security and enforcement of coronary virus protection measures - (<https://zdravlje.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/2020%20CORONAVIRUS/novi%20letak%20corona.jpg>) – respect those as well as the latest Headquarters recommendations
- ✓ **Contact and involvement** - respond to contact initiated by the traumatized person or encourage the contact yourself in an unobtrusive, compassionate and helpful way. Whenever possible use modern communication technologies (phone, cell phone, Viber, Skype ...). Let the person know that you hear what he/she is saying, for example, nod and hold your attention. Be patient and calm.
- ✓ **Stabilization (if needed)** - Calm down and give direction to people who are emotionally overwhelmed or distraught. Notice and acknowledge their feelings, losses, and important events that they share with you, such as the isolation, illness, or death of a loved one.
- ✓ **Gathering information on current needs** - identify immediate needs, gather information, and tailor psychological first aid interventions
- ✓ **Information and practical assistance** - offer practical assistance to meet immediate personal needs e.g. medical assistance, information, food, shelter. Provide information **IF** you have it. Be honest about what you know and what you don't know. Provide information in a way that the person understands – make it simple.
- ✓ **Connecting with social support** - Help establish quick and ongoing contact with the primary supportive group including family members, friends, community assistance
- ✓ **Help the person cope with stress** - Provide information (on stress responses and coping styles) to reduce stress levels and increase adaptive functioning (SARS-CoV-2 virus epidemic and mental health - self-help strategies)
- ✓ **Connecting with services** - Connect people in crisis with appropriate services and keep them informed on available interventions that may be needed in the future
- ✓ **Support** - Praise the strength of the traumatized person, provide them comfort, hope and as much protection as possible from further harm

What are possible immediate reactions to psychological trauma exposure?

Covid-19 epidemic has the characteristics of a frightening, dangerous, threatening, stressful event, or as we commonly call it, a traumatic event. Almost everyone, after being exposed to a traumatic event, experiences some of these reactions. Some people have stronger reactions, and some are less responsive to stress. To have an emotional reaction to trauma is in no way a sign of weakness, but a natural response to stress. Common symptoms are:

- ✓ Fear and concern for your own health and the health of your loved ones
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Sleep difficulties
- ✓ Eating difficulties
- ✓ Concentration difficulties

- ✓ Exacerbation of chronic health problems (physical and mental)
- ✓ Increased intake of alcohol, tobacco and other addictive substances

Why is PFA important and useful?

People do better over the long term if they:

- Feel safe, connected to others, calm, and hopeful
- Have access to social, physical and emotional support
- Regain a sense of control by being able to help themselves

Who can benefit from PFA?

Psychological first aid is a non-specific psychological and social support aimed at practical forms of assistance. PFA helps anyone in crisis and stress. Some people may have an increased need (the elderly, the sick, those who cannot care for themselves and their children).

When should PFA be applied?

When encountering a person in distress, usually immediately following a crisis event.

Who can give PFA?

The first liners are usually family members, neighbours, teachers, community members and emergency workers (ambulance, police, firefighters). PFA is not something that is exclusively provided by mental health professionals.

Where should PFA be provided?

PFA is provided during or immediately after a crisis in conditions that are safe for the person in crisis and for the helper (protective measures to prevent infection, physical security).

Psychological issues that helpers may face

Helping other people can be a source of great satisfactions but it is also a very difficult job.

Possible consequences of helping people in crisis are physical and psychological exhaustion. Maybe you need the PFA yourself, especially in crisis situations where you and your family are affected.

Whenever possible:

- ✓ Be informed about the current situation, the roles and responsibilities of different types of helpers and do not go beyond your jurisdiction.
- ✓ Think about your own health and possible personal and family issues that can lead to serious stress while helping others (Corona Virus Epidemic (SARS-CoV-2) and Mental Health - Self-help Strategies)
- ✓ Seek professional psychological or psychiatric help if you are unable to cope with your own mental health problems or have difficulties to function.

References

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