

**Psychological First Aid Demonstration Project
Preparedness and Emergency Response
Learning Center (PERLC)
Center for Public Health Preparedness (CPHP)
School of Public Health
University at Albany**

**Psychological First Aid Practice Scenarios
Facilitator Guidelines**

This exercise is intended to give participants an opportunity to practice the PFA elements they learned in the online course or other training that they're expected to take before this in-person session.

So that everyone has the chance to practice, participants will work in groups of three, rotating through acting as Helper, Client, and Observer. The exercise itself will take one hour, including 15 minutes per scenario and 15 minutes to discuss the experience with the entire group. It will also take a few minutes to get people started including forming groups and distributing materials, so be mindful of your overall timing and shorten each scenario period if necessary to be sure you have enough time for the large group processing at the end.

Preparing Materials:

Before the training, read through the ten scenario options provided and select the **three** that are the most appropriate for your audience based on their professional fields and the locations where they're most likely to respond to a disaster. Some scenarios mention that the Helper is a mental health professional so those should be reserved for groups with that background, but most are general and can be adapted to any response role.

For each group of three participants, print one copy of each selected scenario (three total) and three copies of the PFA Observer Worksheet. Having the materials collated in advance by group will help you hand them out most efficiently.

Note that the elements listed on the Observer Worksheet are consistent in spirit with most PFA models but the language may be different than the elements described in the specific advanced training your participants took. If you think that might cause confusion you can customize the sheet to be consistent with the model used in that training, but these are general enough that most people will be able to adapt to them.

Reviewing PFA Do's and Don'ts:

While your role is really to facilitate the practice session, not to train participants in delivering PFA, it may be helpful to briefly review some do's and don'ts before they begin, or as part of the follow-up discussion. Some key points:

Don't over-promise or over-reassure; do be realistic in your assurances. In their desire to help, responders often fall into a trap of making promises that can't be kept (either general ones like "everything will be okay" or specific but inaccurate ones like "you'll definitely get enough insurance money to rebuild your home"). It's important to avoid that temptation, since when the promises fall through it can feel like betrayal to the survivor.

Don't minimize the client's losses or make comparisons to other survivors; do validate the client's feelings. Obviously helpers should never say things like "you should consider yourself lucky compared to what other people lost," but sometimes well-intended statements are perceived as insensitive or unhelpful. Remind participants to be conscious of how their words might be received, and to apologize if they realize they've misspoken. Also note that sometimes survivors downplay their own losses because they know others experienced worse, so part of PFA is helping survivors acknowledge their own right to mourn.

Don't change the subject; do stay with the client's focus. The intensity of a discussion with someone experiencing strong emotions can sometimes overwhelm helpers, leading them to try to switch to a lighter topic. Practice can help responders learn to avoid that urge and to meet the client's need to be heard.

Don't fill up silence with chatter; do learn to tolerate silence. This is closely related to the previous point: Sometimes what survivors need is not to talk, but simply to sit and reflect on their experience. But sitting in silence can be extremely challenging, so helpers need to learn to restrain the tendency to make small talk out of their own discomfort.

Don't take client anger or frustration personally; do accept that they're venting and it's not really aimed at you. We tend to focus on emotions like sadness and grief when we think about survivor reactions, but it's also common for anxiety, frustration, and other reactions to be expressed as hostility towards whoever is available – in this case, the PFA provider. It's essential that helpers maintain boundaries and remember that any anger they confront is a result of the client feeling powerless over their situation. It can be helpful to realize that if the roles were reversed, we might be the ones doing the venting.

Forming Groups:

First, please be sure to acknowledge to the group that the scenarios they're about to practice depict distressing situations that some may find upsetting to consider, even though it's only a simulation. If someone really doesn't want to participate for that reason, they could observe a group, or opt out of one particular scenario. However, please emphasize that practicing exposure under these safe conditions is important preparation for being able to help disaster survivors in a real event, so encourage them to participate fully.

Divide participants into groups of three. If numbers don't work out evenly you can have one group of two without an Observer, or one group of four with two Observers.

If you know the professional background of your participants, it's ideal to form groups that mix people with different levels of training and experience so those with less experience can learn from those with more. Similarly, if you know one member of a group is more experienced, encourage that person to act as the Helper in the first round so they can model the process for the others. It's also usually a good idea to break up groups of friends or coworkers who may take the exercise more seriously if they're working with less familiar people. That also provides an excellent networking opportunity for people from different organizations or departments to get to know each other before they become involved in a disaster response, so do encourage people to introduce themselves.

If space allows, suggest that groups move far enough away from each other so they won't be distracted by other discussions.

Instructing Participants:

We recommend that you present these instructions verbally before distributing the handouts – otherwise people tend to start reading the scenarios and tune out the guidelines. Also remind them that there will be a discussion with the entire group at the end so they should be sure to note any questions or points they'd like to discuss.

Instruct them that the **Client** should read the scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but the Helper should not see the suggested client statements in advance. Clients should get into character, read a statement, and then allow the Helper to respond. Clients can go off-script, but should try to cover the main suggested points and to stay in role. They should act appropriately distressed (which sometimes takes the form of numbness or flattened emotions) but not so emotional that it's impossible for the Helper to be effective.

Helpers can refer to the Observer Worksheet as a reminder of PFA elements they might try to use, but they should stay focused on the conversation rather than following a list. Sometimes people get so distracted by thinking about what they should say next that they stop really listening, so encourage Helpers to stay in the moment and concentrate on the discussion. They should try to use whatever PFA elements are relevant to the scenario, recognizing that some won't apply to a particular situation. In some scenarios the Helper's role is specified (for example, a home healthcare aide or mental health counselor) but in most it's left unspecified. In these cases, they should respond in whatever role they might actually play in a disaster – mental health professional, hospital security guard, shelter volunteer, or whatever is realistic for them.

Observers will take notes on the worksheet, noting what elements were used effectively, what might be improved, etc. (These notes are just references for their discussion, not to be handed in.) The Observer will also act as timekeeper, allowing 10 minutes for the PFA intervention followed by 5 minutes for discussion within the small group, focusing on what the Client found helpful (or not) and what the Observer noticed about the exchange.

Modeling PFA

If time allows and you feel comfortable doing it, it would be very useful to demonstrate a roleplay so your participants can observe PFA in action. If you choose to do this, select one of the other scenarios so you're not using one the groups will then practice. You could ask for a volunteer from the group to serve as the Client, or enlist a colleague.

Starting the Exercise:

Once you're sure everyone understands the instructions, give each participant one copy of the PFA Observer Worksheet, and one scenario to use when they're acting as the Client, making sure each Client in the group receives a different scenario.

After 15 minutes, the Facilitator will instruct groups to **switch roles and move on to the next scenario**. Changing roles often seems to cause confusion so tell them that:

- Whoever just played the Helper will now be the Observer
- The previous Client will now be the Helper
- The previous Observer will now be the Client

Repeat the same instructions when it's time to switch to the third scenario.

Follow-Up Discussion

After all three scenarios have been practiced, the entire group will reconvene to discuss the exercise for 15 minutes, led by the Facilitator. Rather than addressing the specific details of the scenarios, this discussion should focus on the **process of practicing PFA**. For example:

- While acting as Helper, did participants feel comfortable and competent? What was particularly challenging? If they said something that didn't seem helpful, how did they recover? How were their own emotions activated by trying to help someone in distress?
- While acting as Client, what was helpful and what wasn't? How would they like to be treated in that situation?
- What did Observers note in terms of body language and other non-verbal cues? What was a particularly positive interaction they saw?

The main goal of this discussion is to validate their recognition that practicing PFA is challenging, and to build confidence in their ability.

Participants will often note that even though they knew it was just a roleplay it still felt very intense. You can point out that this is precisely why we want people to practice so they feel more confident going into real interactions.

PFA Observer Worksheet

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Observer, monitor the exchange and note whether the Helper included each PFA element in their support for the Client so you can give feedback at the end of their discussion. Not all elements will be appropriate for all situations, so focus on what they did well and how they might improve in the future.

PFA Element	Did the Helper address this?
Making a connection	
Attending to physiological needs	
Attending to safety needs	
Providing acknowledgment, recognition, reassurance	
Remaining calm	
Providing warmth, empathy, and genuineness	
Empowering the survivor	
Obtaining information	
Providing accurate information	
Helping clients access social support	

Making a referral for additional help	
Ending the conversation	

DRAFT

Hospital-based Family Assistance Center following a worksite explosion, assisting a family member.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

The Client is a young woman who has come to the hospital seeking information about her husband, who was working in a local factory when a major explosion occurred. Police are directing family members to the hospital for news about workers and bystanders injured in the accident, and rumors are starting to spread among those gathered.

Client Statements:

- The police told me to come here but now no one will tell me anything about my husband. Why won't they let me see him?
- Why won't anyone tell me what's going on? They must know if he's okay. Why won't they just tell me?
- He's not picking up his phone or answering my texts and he always gets back to me right away. I know something is terribly wrong.
- But maybe he's okay. Maybe he decided to skip work today and he's safe in a movie theater somewhere so he doesn't even know what's happened. I'll kill him myself if that's the case! Do you think he's safe somewhere?
- We just got married a few months ago and moved into this town so he could take the job at the factory. I don't really know anyone here.
- We've been trying to get pregnant and maybe I already am. What if I am and he's really badly hurt or even.... But he's not. He's going to be okay for our baby. Right? I should call his mother, I know, but she's just going to blame me for this, like she does for everything. Do I have to call her?
- You know what's going on, don't you? I think you know something you're not telling me.

Emergency Shelter following a tornado, assisting an evacuee.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

A shelter has been opened in a high school gymnasium after a tornado destroyed dozens of homes. The Client is an 18-year-old whose parents and younger sibling are out of town. Presumably they're safe, but the Client has been unable to get in touch with them since phone service is down. The Client wasn't hurt physically, having taken shelter in a closet, but there was extensive damage to the house and the family dog is missing.

Client Statements:

- The rest of my family is away visiting my grandmother but I had to work so I stayed home alone. I guess that's good that they're all away and okay, but I kind of wish they were here with me now.
- They must be freaking out about how I am. I bet they're watching the news non-stop, or maybe they're trying to get home soon. But I heard the airport's closed indefinitely so I don't know how they'll be able to come back.
- I'm going to have to tell them the house is messed up. Are they going to think it's my fault? Maybe I could have done something different, like... I don't really know.
- Why didn't I take the dog inside with me when I heard the siren? I'm such a loser. My little brother's never going to forgive me for not saving the dog.
- Were you here for the tornado? I've never been through anything like that before. People on TV always talk about how loud it is, like a freight train, but I had no real idea... [shudders at the memory].
- Damn, my stomach really hurts.

Disaster Recovery Center following a major flood, assisting a fellow helper.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

A DRC has been opened after a powerful hurricane flooded entire coastal communities, displacing thousands of people. It's now a week after the storm and the demand for services means clients must wait for many hours in a hot, humid gym in order to begin the process of filing claims for benefits. Tempers are short and rumors are flying about unfair distribution of resources. The Client is an older man in a FEMA vest who is pacing around the staff break-room and muttering to himself.

Client Statements:

- I took this job so I could try to help these poor people and all they do is scream at me!
- I'm doing my best but there are just so many of them, and the paperwork for each case takes freaking forever to complete. I feel like it's my fault. If only I could work faster.
- I know some of the questions are stupid but that's not my fault! If they'd just answer them rather than complaining about them we could get them help a lot faster.
- Do they think I'm getting rich doing this job? Hah! I just answered an ad to make a little extra money now that I'm retired but this is definitely not worth it. I think I'd better quit before I punch someone or have a stroke.
- I'm really not up for doing this anymore. I'm just not able to cope.
- Sorry, ignore me, I'm just tired. Please don't tell my supervisor I said any of this, okay? I don't want to lose this job.

Hospital Emergency Department waiting room following a sports team bus crash, assisting the mother of a victim.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

While returning from an away game, a bus carrying a local high school sports team crashed shortly before reaching the school. Many students were injured, some severely, and they've been transported to hospitals throughout the region. The Client is a middle-aged woman who was notified that her daughter was among those who have been brought to this hospital, where she's currently in surgery. The extent of her injuries is not yet known.

Client Statements:

- I – I just got this phone call out of the blue that this accident happened and my daughter is hurt but I don't know how badly and they won't tell me anything except that she's in surgery.
- [Looks around as if she's not sure where she is.]
- She's got to be okay. She's all I have.
- Do you know why the crash happened? Was the driver drunk or something? That's how we lost her dad.
- [Stares into space.]
- Look, I know you can find out how she is. Won't you please help me?
- Why her? Why did she have to be the one to get hurt?

Homecare Setting with a recommended evacuation due to an impending winter storm, assisting an elderly client.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

A late winter ice storm is approaching, with predictions that downed trees and power lines will cause widespread and long-lasting power outages, and will make travel impossible starting in a few hours. The Client is a 92-year-old woman with some physical limitations but no cognitive impairment. Her son, Tom, lives on the other side of the country. She and her beloved dog, Riley, live in her home of 30 years with the help of a live-in aide (the Helper) who is trying to convince her to evacuate as authorities are strongly urging.

Client Statements:

- I'm not going! I'd rather take my chances here than go to some horrible shelter.
- Especially if I can't take Riley with me. There is no way I'm going to be separated from him so you can just stop trying.
- You go, I'll be fine. And if I'm not, well, then it's just my time to go.
- I bet Tom is putting you up to this as a way of getting me out of this house permanently. I know he just wants to sell it and put me away in some nursing home until I die. But if that happens you'll be out of a job so it's in your best interest to stay too!
- I can live without electricity just fine. I'll just put on another sweater. And there's plenty of canned soup I can heat up on the stove. Riley and I can take care of ourselves.

Nursing Home Evacuation due to a hurricane, assisting relocated elderly patient.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

It's late summer and a powerful hurricane is being forecast to make landfall in 24 hours in a coastal town where an 80-bed rehabilitation center and assisted living facility is located. In cooperation with the local Emergency Manager, the facility's manager decided to evacuate the center according to their disaster management plan. All staff members were called in to help prepare the residents for relocation by bus or ambulance. Per the evacuation plan, the most fragile patients were transported to hospitals, but the majority are now being settled into another nursing home outside of the hurricane danger zone for what is expected to be a two to three day stay. The Client is an elderly man with mild cognitive impairment who is confused by the new setting and is becoming anxious and agitated.

Client Statements:

- They keep telling me this is my room for now but this is not my room. My room has blue walls, and only one bed in it, and this room has two beds in it.
- Why is everyone rushing around like this?
- It's time for art class but the art room isn't where it's supposed to be!
- My son usually comes to visit me in the morning but I don't think he came today. Did I do something to make him mad? I know sometimes I forget things and he gets annoyed with me.
- Did my son send me away to punish me?
- I can tell you're hiding something from me. Why won't you tell me what's happening?
- I'm going to tell my son about all of this when I see him, believe me!

Avian flu pandemic POD, assisting mother of two young children

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

A particularly virulent strain of avian flu has emerged, and production of a vaccine has been expedited though supplies are still limited. The virus appears to be most dangerous for young people with healthy immune systems so they're being given priority for vaccination; a major public health campaign has urged individuals and families to come to a Point of Dispensing in the parking lot of the regional hospital to receive the vaccine. The Client is a mother with two young children who is waiting in line, looking around nervously.

Client Statements:

- This doesn't make any sense – first they tell us to avoid contact with crowds and then they make us join a crowd to get the vaccination?
- I heard that since they had to rush the production of the vaccine it's really unsafe and tons of people are getting sicker from it than if they got the actual flu. Is that true?
- Ugh, the guy behind me in line is coughing and I'm sure he's got it. I've got to get my kids out of here!
- My husband's in the National Guard and he got called up to help deal with this outbreak. I'm so afraid he's going to get exposed! Plus of course that means I'm dealing with the kids on my own, as usual.
- The news said that for now only people under 40 can get the shot, but usually by this time of year my parents would have had flu shots and now they're being told they can't have it. I bet all of those rich old guys in Congress got their shots already!
- I'm feeling kind of short of breath. I think I may be getting sick already....

Infectious disease outbreak, assisting quarantined traveler.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

An emerging outbreak of a severe respiratory illness has been recognized in Central America. Despite efforts to screen all travellers from the region for sign of sickness, a passenger on a New York-bound flight became visibly ill, with intense coughing and sneezing. Out of concern that the virus may have spread through the plane's recirculated air, all passengers have been placed in mandatory quarantine for the 10-day incubation period. They're being lodged in a motel where they're brought food and other supplies each day. They have television, phone, and internet access but are not allowed to leave their rooms or to have face-to-face contact with any visitors. It's now Day 6 of the quarantine period. The Client is a 42-year-old construction worker who is married with two teenage children. He's become increasingly angry and hostile towards those monitoring his health, so they have asked the Helper, who works for the Health Department, to provide PFA over the phone.

Client Statements:

- Can you get them to let me out of here? I have to get out of here!
- I'm completely fine! I'm not coughing or sneezing, I don't have a fever or headache, and if I have to have my vitals checked one more time I don't know what I might do.
- I already missed a week of work to go check on my parents in their country, and now I'm out for another 10 days. How's my wife supposed to feed our kids when I'm not working? And I'll be lucky if I have a job at all when I finally get out of here.
- The kids say they're behaving but I bet they're giving my wife hell by now. They need me around to keep them in line.
- Man, if I watch one more press conference with that jackass governor bragging about how he's taking care of his people by keeping us passengers locked up here I'm really going to lose it.
- Why did that woman get on the plane in the first place? She must have known she was sick but she exposed everyone anyway. I hope she dies from that disease.
- I'm going stir crazy in this room.

School shooting, assisting family of child survivor.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

While several classes from an elementary school were outside playing during recess, a gunman opened fire from the border of the playground, killing six children and wounding many more. It's now two days after the event and a Family Assistance Center has been opened in the local high school to provide support to the community. The Client is the parent of an eight-year-old child who was unharmed physically but who witnessed the event directly. One of the child's closest friends was killed. The parent and child are both present, but the child is silent and seems dazed while the parent speaks with the Helper, a mental health counselor.

Client Statements:

- I'm so worried about my daughter. I can't believe she experienced something so terrible at such a young age.
- She's barely said a word since this happened, but she won't let me out of her sight. She keeps trying to climb into my lap, which she hasn't done in ages.
- I'm so grateful that she wasn't hurt, but the other parents who weren't so lucky – I just can't imagine....
- She knows her friend Amy is, um, gone, but I don't think she really understands it. I mean, at that age, how could she?
- Ugh, I haven't reached out to Amy's parents yet and I feel terrible about it. I just don't know what to say to them. I mean, I still have my daughter and they don't, so what can I possibly say to them?
- She had such bad nightmares the first night, then last night she refused to go to sleep so she's exhausted on top of everything else.
- How can I ever send her back to that school? Maybe I should homeschool her so I know she's always safe, or we should move or something.
- Will she ever recover from this?

Mass shooting, assisting hospital staff.

Note to participant: When you're serving as the Client, you will read the following scenario description to the group before beginning the exercise so everyone understands the situation, but you shouldn't let the Helper see the suggested Client Statements. Those are comments you can use to see how the Helper responds using the elements of PFA.

Scenario Description:

After a mass shooting at a local nightclub, dozens of critically wounded patients were treated at the regional trauma center. While the medical staff succeeded in saving many lives, some patients did not survive, and the intensity of the response as well as the exposure to distraught family members waiting for news about their loved ones has taken a toll on staff members. The hospital social workers and chaplains are doing outreach the next day to provide support. The Client is a nurse who typically works in the pediatric ward but who was called into the ED to assist with the response.

Client Statements:

- I haven't been able to get those images out of mind since yesterday. I feel kind of shaky today.
- All that blood....
- A lot of the patients were around my own age. In fact I went to that nightclub once so, you know, I keep thinking it could have been me, or one of my friends.
- How could someone have done this? What's wrong with people?
- We see some tough stuff in my department between the sick kids and their parents, but the screaming and crying I heard in the waiting room – I dreamed about that last night.
- I'm trying to focus on the good work we did and all the people we saved, but it's hard not to keep thinking about the ones we lost.
- I love being a nurse, mostly, but if I'm going to have to do that kind of thing again maybe I'm not in the right field.