

*Psychological first aid:* Guide for field workers



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For feedback or questions on technical aspects of this publication, please contact:

- Dr Mark van Ommeren, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, World Health Organization, 20 Avenue Appia, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland (email: [vanommerenm@who.int](mailto:vanommerenm@who.int), tel: + 41-22-791-2111);
- Dr Leslie Snider, Senior Programme Advisor, War Trauma Foundation, Nienoord 5, 1112 XE Diemen, the Netherlands (email: [lsnider@wartrauma.nl](mailto:lsnider@wartrauma.nl), tel: +31-20-6438538).
- Alison Schafer, Senior Program Advisor, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, Humanitarian and Emergency Affairs Team, World Vision Australia. 1 Vision Drive, Burwood East, Victoria, 3151, Australia (email: [alison.schafer@worldvision.com.au](mailto:alison.schafer@worldvision.com.au), tel: +61-3-9287-2233)

This document provides technical guidance to implement the WHO Mental Health Global Action Programme (mhGAP).

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# FOREWORD

When terrible things happen in our communities, countries and the world, we want to reach out a helping hand to those who are affected. This guide covers **psychological first aid** which involves humane, supportive and practical help to fellow human beings suffering serious crisis events. It is written for people in a position to help others who have experienced an extremely distressing event. It gives a framework for supporting people in ways that respect their dignity, culture and abilities. Despite its name, psychological first aid covers both social and psychological support.

Perhaps you are called upon as a staff member or volunteer to help in a major disaster, or you find yourself at the scene of an accident where people are hurt. Perhaps you are a teacher or health worker talking with someone from your community who has just witnessed the violent death of a loved one. This guide will help you to know the most supportive things to say and do for people who are very distressed. It will also give you information on how to approach a new situation safely for yourself and others, and not to cause harm by your actions.

Psychological first aid has been recommended by many international and national expert groups, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Sphere Project. Psychological first aid is an alternative to psychological debriefing. In 2009, the World Health Organization's (WHO) mhGAP Guidelines Development Group evaluated the evidence for psychological first aid and psychological debriefing. They concluded that psychological first aid, rather than psychological debriefing, should be offered to people in severe distress after being recently exposed to a traumatic event.

This guide was developed in order to have widely agreed upon psychological first aid materials for use in low and middle income countries. The information we have given here is a model only. You will need to adapt it appropriately to the local context and the culture of the people you will help.

This guide – endorsed by many international agencies – reflects the emerging science and international consensus on how to support people in the immediate aftermath of extremely stressful events.

**Shekhar Saxena**

**Director**

Department of Mental Health  
and Substance Abuse

World Health Organization

**Stefan Germann**

**Director**

Learning and Partnerships,  
Global Health Team

World Vision International

**Marieke Schouten**

**Director**

War Trauma Foundation

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Writing and Editorial Team

Leslie Snider (*War Trauma Foundation, WTF*), Mark van Ommeren (*World Health Organization, WHO*) and Alison Schafer (*World Vision International, WVI*).

## Steering Group (alphabetical)

Stefan Germann (*WVI*), Erin Jones (*WVI*), Relinde Reiffers (*WTF*), Marieke Schouten (*WTF*), Shekhar Saxena (*WHO*), Alison Schafer (*WVI*), Leslie Snider (*WTF*), Mark van Ommeren (*WHO*).

## Artwork Team

Illustrations by Julie Smith (*PD Consulting*). Artwork and design by Adrian Soriano (*WVI*). Artwork coordination by Andrew Wadey (*WVI*).

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## Endorsement

This document has been endorsed by 23 international agencies (*see names with logos on front and back cover*) as well as Médecins Sans Frontières (*MSF*).

## Contributors and Reviewers

Numan Ali (*Baghdad Teaching Hospital, Iraq*), Amanda Allan (*Mandala Foundation, Australia*), Abdalla Mansour Amer (*United Nations Department of Safety and Security*), Mary Jo Baca (*International Medical Corps, Jordan*), Nancy Baron (*Global Psycho-Social Initiatives, Egypt*), Pierre Bastin (*Médecins Sans Frontières, Switzerland*), Nancy Beaudoin (*Consultant, France*), Endry van den Berg (*War Child Holland, the Netherlands*), Elsa Berglund (*Church of Sweden, Sweden*), Sandra Bernhardt (*Action Contre le Faim, France*), Cecile Bizouerne (*Action Contre le Faim, France*), Margriet Blaauw (*War Child Holland, the Netherlands*), Martha Bragin (*CARE, USA*), Maria Bray (*Terre des Hommes, Switzerland*), Chris Brewin (*University College London, United Kingdom*), Melissa Brymer (*National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, USA*), Susie Burke (*Australian Psychological Society, Australia*), Sonia Chehil (*Dalhousie University, Canada*), Eliza Cheung (*Chinese University of Hong Kong, People's Republic of China*), Tatyana Chshieva (*Dostizhenia Achievements Foundation, Russian Federation*), Laetitia Clouin (*Consultant, France*), Penelope Curling (*UNICEF*), Jeanette Diaz-Laplante (*University of West Georgia, USA*), Annie Sophie Dybdal (*Save the Children, Denmark*), Tonka Eibs (*CARE, Austria*), Carina Ferreira-Borges (*WHO, Republic of the Congo*), Amber Gray (*Restorative Resources, USA*), Lina Hamdan (*World Vision, Jordan*), Sarah Harrison (*Church of Sweden, Sweden*), Michael Hayes (*Save the Children, USA*), Takashi Isutzu (*United Nations Department of Management*), Kaz de Jong (*Médecins Sans Frontières, the Netherlands*), Mark Jordans (*HealthNet TPO, Nepal*), Siobhan Kimmerle (*WVI, Jordan*), Patricia Kormoss (*WHO, Switzerland*), Unni Krishnan (*Plan International, United Kingdom*), Ronald Law (*Department of Health, Philippines*), Christine McCormick (*Save the Children, United Kingdom*), Amanda Melville (*UNICEF*), Fritha Melville (*Mandala Foundation, Australia*), Kate Minto (*Mandala Foundation, Australia*), Jonathan Morgan (*Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative - REPSI, South Africa*), Kelly O'Donnell (*NGO Forum for Health, Switzerland*), Patrick Onyango (*Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, Uganda*), Pau Perez-Sales (*Médecos del Mundo, Spain*), Bhava Nath Poudyal (*International Committee of the Red Cross, Nepal*), Joe Prewitt-Diaz (*American Red Cross, Puerto Rico*), Megan Price (*WVI, Australia*), Robert Pynoos (*National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, USA*), Nino Makhashvili (*Global Initiative on Psychiatry, Georgia*), Miryam Rivera Holguin (*Consultant, Peru*), Sabine Rakotomalala (*Terre des Hommes, Switzerland*), Gilbert Reyes (*National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, USA*), Daryn Reichter (*Stanford University, USA*), Chen Reis (*WHO, Switzerland*), Khalid Saeed (*WHO, Egypt*), Louise Searle (*WVI, Australia*), Marian Schilperoord (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Switzerland*), Guglielmo Schinina (*International Organization for Migration, Switzerland*), Merritt Schreiber (*University of California Los Angeles, USA*), Renato Souza (*International Committee of the Red Cross, Switzerland*), Alan Steinberg (*National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, USA*), Susannah Tipping (*Mandala Foundation, Australia*), Wietse Tol (*HealthNet TPO, Nepal*), Iris Trapman (*Mandala Foundation, Australia*), Patricia Watson (*National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, USA*), Inka Weissbecker (*International Medical Corps, Gaza*), Mike Wessells (*Columbia University, USA*), Nana Wiedemann (*International Federation of the Red Cross, Denmark*), Richard Williams (*Glamorgan University, United Kingdom*), M Taghi Yasamy (*WHO, Switzerland*), Rob Yin (*American Red Cross, USA*), William Yule (*Children and War Foundation, United Kingdom*), Doug Zatzick (*University of Washington, USA*).

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# CHAPTER 1

## UNDERSTANDING PFA



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