



RUTGERS HEALTH
Center for Public Health
Workforce Development
School of Public Health

Stress First Aid:

A Practical Framework for Early Stress Support

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Stress First Aid

By the end of this session, participants will:

- Understand Stress First Aid
- Recognize the Stress Continuum
- Learn the 7 Core Actions

What is Stress First Aid



Originally developed by the Navy and Marine Corps, Stress First Aid (SFA) is a peer-support model designed for individuals without formal mental health training.

- It helps identify early signs of stress in oneself and others and provides simple, actionable steps to restore calm, confidence, and control.**
- SFA is based on the Stress Continuum Model, a visual tool for understanding and responding to stress over time.**

Stress First Aid

for HEALTH CARE WORKERS



Stress First Aid



National Center for
PTSD

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

The *Stress First Aid for Health Care Workers Manual* and materials, developed by Patricia Watson of the National Center for PTSD and Richard Westphal of the University of Virginia, are adapted from the original *Combat and Operational Stress First Aid (COSFA) Field Operations Manual*, with input from SFA versions that were developed for Rescue and EMS, Wildland, Law Enforcement, and Pre-Trial and Probation settings.

Watson, P., & Westphal, R.J. (2020). *Stress First Aid for Health Care Workers*. National Center for PTSD. Available on: www.ptsd.va.gov.

NJ NEW provides Virtual Schwartz Rounds and Stress First Aid Training



Offer Safe Space for Supportive Discussion

Promote Mental Well-being & Self-Care

Reduce Burnout

Optimize Opportunities to Change Institutional Culture

Normalize Sharing of Emotional Experiences

Promote a Resilient & Emotionally Healthy Nursing Workforce

NJNEW hosted 10 cohorts of Stress First Aid for 292 nurses and 104 organizations across NJ.⁵

VIRTUAL SCHWARTZ ROUNDS (VSR) FOR ALL NURSES

Apr 16, 2026 12:00 PM

Providing nurses an opportunity amid fast-paced, stressed work lives to openly and honestly discuss the social and emotional issues they face in caring for patients and families.

- We have hosted over 100 sessions for 6000 nurses across NJ.
- VSR are free of charge and offer 1 contact hour for each session.



<https://njnew.org/>

"Why Time Off Matters: Rest with Purpose, Return with Strength"

Identify: Notice the signs that you need time away to rest and reset.

Discuss: Talk about how to plan time off that truly restores you.

Share: Share ways you spend your time off to recharge and return refreshed.



Stress First Aid

The goal of SFA is to identify stress reactions in self and others along a continuum and to help reduce the likelihood that stress outcomes develop into more severe or long-term problems.

The core actions of SFA are appropriate for many occupational settings during critical events as well as for ongoing care.

Why Stress First Aid Works

- Normalizes stress reactions
 - Encourages early support
 - Strengthens team resilience
 - Reduces long-term impact

Stress First Aid: *How It Works*

The model is designed for everyday integration across all areas of life:

- **Self-Awareness:** Recognizing your own stress levels before they become overwhelming.
- **Peer & Family Support:** Helping you identify "stress injuries" in friends, family members, and coworkers.
- **Prevention & Recovery:** When used regularly, SFA acts as a preventative tool to mitigate significant stress or shorten the recovery time after experiencing excessive, overwhelming pressure.



Green (Ready)

Functioning well

Yellow (Reacting)

Mild, temporary stress

Orange (Injured)

Persistent or more intense stress

Red (Ill)

Clinical distress requiring professional support

The Stress Continuum illustrates how people move between levels of stress—from readiness to distress—and highlights the importance of early recognition and support.

Public health professionals move along the stress continuum during prolonged response—early support strengthens resilience and prevents burnout.

Stress First Aid Model

The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a self-care, leadership, and peer support model developed for those in high-risk occupations.

It includes seven core functions that will help you to identify and address early signs of stress reactions in yourself and others *in an ongoing way* (not just after “critical incidents”).

Stress First Aid

The foundation of the model should be maintained continuously to sustain situational awareness.

- **Check:** Observe and assess. This involves looking for "stress injuries" in yourself or others by monitoring changes in behavior, mood, or performance.
- **Coordinate:** Get help or collaborate. This means knowing when a situation requires more than peer support and connecting the individual to appropriate resources or higher levels of care.

SFA Core Functions

The Secondary Actions

- These are specific interventions used based on what the "Check" phase reveals.
- **Cover: Ensure Safety.** This is the most immediate priority—reducing any ongoing threat or danger to create a sense of security.
- **Calm: Lower the Intensity.** Helping the individual quiet their physiological and emotional arousal (e.g., through breathing, grounding, or rest).
- **Connect: Social Support.** Reducing isolation by fostering meaningful interaction with friends, family, or the "crew."
- **Competence: Restore Skills.** Rebuilding the individual's ability to handle their tasks and challenges, which often helps restore a sense of control.
- **Confidence: Restore Self-Worth.** Helping the individual regain a sense of hope, self-esteem, and belief in their future.

Seven Cs of Stress First Aid:

1. CHECK

Assess: observe and listen

2. COORDINATE

Get help, refer as needed

3. COVER

Get to safety ASAP

4. CALM

Relax, slow down, refocus

5. CONNECT

Get support from others

6. COMPETENCE

Restore effectiveness

7. CONFIDENCE

Restore self-esteem and hope

Green

Yellow

Orange

Red

Ready

Status: Functioning well, balanced, and in control.

Common Signs:
Calm and focused.
Good sleep and energy
Positive outlook
Effective performance

Support Focus:
Maintain healthy routines
Encourage peer connection
Reinforce strengths and resilience

Reacting

Status: Mild, temporary stress reactions

Common Signs:
Irritability or frustration
Trouble sleeping
Worry or feeling overwhelmed
Decreased concentration

Support Focus:
Normalize stress responses
Encourage breaks and self-care
Use calming strategies (breathing, grounding)
Check in with peers

Injured

Status: More persistent or intense stress injury

Common Signs: Anxiety or sadness that won't go away, withdrawal from others, and burnout or emotional exhaustion.
Reduced performance.

Support Focus: Increase support and connection.
Adjust workload if possible.
Encourage professional support (EAP, counseling).
Rebuild a sense of competence and control

ILL

Status: Clinical level distress or mental health condition.

Common Signs:
Depression or severe anxiety, PTSD symptoms
Substance misuse
Inability to function in daily roles

Support Focus:
Immediate professional help, Mental health treatment, Ongoing support and follow-up.
Ensure safety and stabilization

Stress First Aid

- **GREEN — READY (Thriving in Role)**
- **Status:** Functioning effectively in a demanding public health environment
- **Common Signs:**
 - Focused, clear decision-making
 - Steady energy during long response periods
 - Strong teamwork and communication
 - Sense of purpose in protecting community health
- **Public Health Supports:**
 - Maintain manageable workloads and clear roles
 - Encourage regular team check-ins
 - Promote routines (meals, rest, movement)
 - Reinforce mission and impact



Green (Ready)

Stress First Aid

- **YELLOW — REACTING (Operational Stress)**
- **Status:** Expected stress during active response or high workload
- **Common Signs:**
 - Irritability during long shifts
 - Fatigue from surge response (e.g., outbreaks, emergencies)
 - Difficulty concentrating on rapidly changing guidance
 - Feeling overwhelmed by volume of cases/data
- **Public Health Supports:**
 - Normalize: *“This is a high-demand period—stress is expected”*
 - Build in micro-breaks during shifts
 - Rotate high-intensity tasks (e.g., case investigations)
 - Encourage peer support and brief daily huddles



Yellow (Reacting)

Stress First Aid

- **ORANGE — INJURED (Cumulative Strain / Burnout Risk)**
- **Status:** Ongoing or worsening stress affecting functioning
- **Common Signs:**
 - Emotional exhaustion or detachment from the work
 - Cynicism or reduced sense of impact
 - Withdrawal from team or community engagement
 - Errors, missed details, or decreased productivity
- **Public Health Supports:**
 - Adjust workload, redistribute tasks
 - Provide access to supervision and structured support
 - Encourage use of EAP or counseling services
 - Reconnect staff to meaningful aspects of their work
 - Offer time off or recovery periods when possible



Orange (Injured)

Stress First Aid

- **RED — ILL (Significant Distress / Impairment)**
- **Status:** Mental health conditions or inability to function safely
- **Common Signs:**
 - Severe anxiety, depression, or trauma symptoms
 - Inability to perform essential duties
 - Substance misuse or harmful coping
 - Feeling hopeless, unsafe, or overwhelmed
- **Public Health Supports:**
 - Immediate referral to professional care
 - Ensure safety and remove from high-risk duties if needed
 - Provide ongoing follow-up and reintegration support
 - Reduce stigma around seeking help



Red (III)

The five evidence-based actions help individuals recover and function more effectively after stress and adversity.



Key Takeaways Stress First Aid

Stress reactions are normal

- Early support prevents long-term injury
- Small check-ins matter
- You don't have to fix everything—just don't ignore it

Stress First Aid

Stress First Aid reminds us that caring for the public's health begins with caring for ourselves and each other.

By recognizing stress early and responding with intention, we support individual well-being, strengthen organizational resilience, and sustain the public health workforce.



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