Stress First Aid (SFA)
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The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a self-care and peer support model developed for those in high-risk occupations like military, fire and rescue, and law enforcement. It includes seven actions that you identify and address early signs of stress reactions in yourself and others in an ongoing way (not just after “critical incidents”).

While stress reactions may be relatively common in stressful jobs, SFA is meant to be used by anyone who is in an ongoing stressful situation, particularly when functioning is impaired or there is significant distress involved, such as:

- No longer feeling like your normal self
- Loss of control of emotions or behavior
- Excessive guilt, shame or blame
- Panic, rage, or depression

Stress Continuum Model

The Stress Continuum Model is a foundational part of the SFA model. It was developed as a way to assess the level of your own and other’s stress responses. It was first developed for by Navy/Marine Corps service members as a way to acknowledge that stress reactions occur on a continuum, and that early awareness and response could bring a person back into a less severe zone before they had the need for more formal intervention.

*Figure 1: The Stress Continuum Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>READY (Green)</th>
<th>REACTING (Yellow)</th>
<th>INJURED (Orange)</th>
<th>ILL (Red)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEFINITION</strong></td>
<td>• Optimal functioning</td>
<td>• Mild and transient distress or impairment</td>
<td>• Persistent and disabling distress or loss of function</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adaptive growth</td>
<td>• Always goes away</td>
<td>• Clinical mental disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wellness</td>
<td>• Low risk</td>
<td>• Unhealed stress injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FEATURES</strong></td>
<td>• At one’s best</td>
<td>• Feeling irritable, anxious or down</td>
<td>• Symptoms persist and worsen over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Well trained and prepared</td>
<td>• Loss of motivation</td>
<td>• Severe distress or social or occupational impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• In control</td>
<td>• Loss of focus</td>
<td>• Hopelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Physically, mentally, and spiritually fit</td>
<td>• Difficulty sleep</td>
<td>• PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mission-focused</td>
<td>• Muscle tension, heightened heart rate, breathing, or other physical changes</td>
<td>• Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Motivated</td>
<td>• Not having fun</td>
<td>• Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Calm and steady</td>
<td>• Excessive guilt, shame, or blame</td>
<td>• Substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Having fun</td>
<td>• Excessive wear and tear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAUSES</strong></td>
<td>• Any stressor / trigger</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The crux of the stress continuum model is that stress responses lie along a spectrum of severity. Everyone will react when faced with severe enough or extended enough stress, and many factors can affect how they respond and how they recover. A person’s reactions can range relatively rapidly from Green to Yellow to Orange to Red zone, and back again. The stigma associated with reacting to stress can result in someone trying to conceal stress reactions from peers and those at work, to avoid perceived judgment, employment consequences, and/or medical or psychological intervention. However, when a person recognizes the signs of orange zone stress in themselves or others around them, it can often make a difference to be more disciplined about self-care for a period of time, or to support a coworker or get them connected with a trusted support. This may help prevent stress reactions from progressing into the Red Zone.

Four types of stress are most likely to move someone into the orange zone. Generally, entering the orange or red zones are the result of a combination of the four following types of stressors:

- **Life Threat**: life-threatening or other situations that provoke terror, horror or helplessness. This type of injury can include experiencing a near-miss or close call.

- **Loss**: grief due to the loss of close comrades, leaders, family members or other cared-for individuals. This can also include loss of role, functioning, relationships, and values.

- **Inner Conflict**: a sense of inner turmoil due to conflict between one's moral/ethical beliefs and current experiences. Inner conflict can result from acting outside of internal, self-imposed morals or values, or the perception of contributing to or being unable to prevent harm to others. Indications for inner conflict include the words: “could’ve,” “should’ve,” “ought to have,” “why me?” or “if only.”

- **Wear and Tear**: the result of fatigue and accumulation of prolonged stress, including from non-operational sources, without sufficient sleep, rest and restoration.

**The Stress First Aid Model’s Core Actions**

![Stress First Aid Model's Core Actions](image)

**Figure 2: The Stress First Aid Model’s Core Actions**
Stress First Aid is based on a set of five evidence-based elements that have been linked to better functioning after stress and adversity across a number of settings. These elements are: (1) regaining a sense of safety, or cover, (2) restoring calm, to reduce intense physiological arousal and negative emotions, (3) feeling connected to sources of social support, (4) increasing the sense of self-efficacy, which means feeling competent to handle the situations that create stress, or ones own reactions to the stress, and (5) experiencing hope, or confidence, in ones self and the world.

The SFA model includes two additional actions, Check and Coordinate, which are considered continuous actions because they should be performed in an ongoing way to monitor and recruit assistance any time a person is showing persistent Orange Zone reactions. In contrast, the other five SFA actions are used only as needed.

Check

The Check action in SFA involves increased situation awareness about stress reactions in yourself and your coworkers in an ongoing way, whether stressors at work or at home cause them. The components of Check involve:

- **Observing** what is going on by noting how you or your coworker is being affected, and by what. This is not meant to be an intrusive process, but one of awareness and caring.
- **Keeping track of** the key indicators of the Stress Zones, as well as triggers or reminders. Pay special attention to stressor events (both at work and on the home front) and the internal distress and changes in functioning that these events (or their accumulation over time) may have provoked. If SFA actions have already been used, you will also keep track of whether they have been effective.
- **Examining** all the information gathered from your observations over time, as well as from other sources, such as peers and supervisors.
- **Deciding** on what stress zone is involved, whether anyone is in danger, and what potential next steps and/or SFA actions need to be taken, based on the information you gather.

The Check action often begins with awareness that an individual has been exposed to specific stressors. However, exposure to stressors is not enough to warrant SFA. *Most people who experience even intense stressors don’t need help.* What triggers the sequence of Checks that initiate SFA are not the events themselves but *indications* that someone who has been exposed to these events is functioning in the Orange or Red Zone.

Coordinate

The Coordinate action in SFA involves getting any additional information and assistance that might be needed. This could involve consulting with and collaborating with others, or informing those who need to know. The key components of the Coordinate action involve:

- **Collaborating** with everyone who has a stake in the well being of the stressed individual, with an emphasis on discretion when collaborating. Inform those who “need to know” while protecting the stressed individual’s privacy as much as possible.
• **Getting assistance** from others at any step in the process, especially when help is needed to care for those in the Orange Zone.

• **Informing** the chain of command to the extent that they need to know.

• **Referring** the stress-affected person to others who can help, either via a direct hand-off to formal treatment, or through a more gradual mentoring process that results in them eventually getting the care they need.

Confidentiality may be challenging when using the Coordinate action, so you may need to ask for advice from those in your organization as to the most appropriate ways to refer for care or inform others in your setting.

**NOTE:** If an individual indicates that he or she wants to harm themselves or others it should be reported to 911 immediately. Be prepared to provide name, location, and cell phone number. Stay with the individual physically or online until help arrives. If possible, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 to speak to a crisis counselor.

**Cover**

To provide Cover means to ensure ongoing safety, usually performed more for others more than yourself. The components of Cover involve:

- **Standing by** an individual and remaining available and ready to assist as needed.

- **Making the person safe** in any way you can. When necessary, Cover also encompasses **making others safe** from the person if he/she is not functioning well because of stress reactions.

- **Encouraging a perception of safety** for both affected individuals and their families via a greater commitment to organizational safety and order.

**Calm**

The goal of the Calm action in SFA is to reduce the intensity of physiological, emotional and behavioral stress. There is overlap between the actions of Cover and Calm, but the difference is that the primary goal of Cover is safety, and Calm actions may have no direct connection with safety. Calm actions for yourself or others involve:

- **Stopping, quieting oneself, and ceasing physical exertion** if possible, such as by sitting down or walking away, with the goal of slowing heart rate.

- **Regaining composure** to move into a more orderly and coherent way of thinking and reacting. For instance, you can help an individual compose him or herself by drawing attention away from chaotic inner thoughts and feelings, and refocusing him or her on another task that is less stressful.

- **Resting or sleeping** for as long as is necessary, which is sometimes the only thing that will restore a person to more effective functioning.

- **Soothing**, which means to provide a calm physical presence and/or listen in a caring way.

**Connect**
The Connect action of SFA involves restoring or increasing social support, such as asking for or providing support when you see Orange Zone stress in yourself or others. The elements of the Connect action involve:

- **Being with** the person who is experiencing Orange zone stress, when they need support. This means being present, showing support, listening and/or mentoring and empathizing.
- **Promoting connection**, which may involve including the person in an activity, problem-solving obstacles that are getting in their way to receiving social support, or giving help and information in strictly practical way.
- **Reducing the person’s sense of isolation**, which can often occur when Orange Zone stress reactions make the person want to be alone. This may involve improving the person’s understanding of the situation or his or her stress reactions. Often, you can help the person to see that stress reactions are understandable and acceptable, or that they are not alone in their experience of stress reactions.

**Competence**

The Competence action of SFA focuses on fostering and restoring a stress-affected person’s capacity to function in all his or her important life roles, including occupational, personal, and social domains. Competence elements involve:

- **Improving social skills** that have been damaged by stress, which can negatively affect a person’s ability to function with others at home and on the job.
- **Improving occupational skills** that have either contributed to stress reactions, or may have been damaged by stress reactions. This may require mentoring, respite, and retraining.
- **Fostering the development of coping skills** that can help improve one’s abilities to deal with stress reactions.

**Confidence**

The Confidence action of SFA may be a more challenging action to implement than the rest of the SFA actions, but it may also have the greatest impact for someone who has lost confidence in themselves or others. The Confidence action involves promoting realistic hope and building self-esteem that may have been damaged or lost as a result of stress, promoting confidence in core values and beliefs, or bolstering pride and commitment. The components of Confidence involve:

- **Fostering trust**, which can be trust in many things, such as peers, equipment, leaders, self or mission.
- **Increasing hope**, which is often the result of forgiving self or others, or being able to imagine the future in a positive way.
- **Improving self-worth**, which includes improving belief in self, accurate self-image, self-respect, and the awareness of and motivation to take the steps necessary to achieve one’s life goals.
- **Fostering meaning**, which includes the process of making sense of the events on one’s life, having a sense of purpose, holding a spiritual or philosophical perspective related to the human condition, or having a belief in others that gets one through difficult times.
SFA Group / Educational Format

The SFA model is primarily a one-on-one model, so that it can be more effectively tailored for the needs and priorities of the individual involved. However, in certain circumstances, SFA actions can also be used to structure a group following a stressful event. This use may look similar to a debriefing model in that it systematically uses all the five core SFA actions to lead a discussion, but there are some important differences:

1. No one is required to attend if they don’t want to attend, and the group doesn’t need to occur within any specific window of time following the event. Those involved should determine the best time for the group.
2. The stressful event is not revisited or described in detail.
3. The discussion is focused on how the event is impacting individuals in the present moment, and into the future, within the SFA frame of five essential human needs (the needs for cover, calm, connectedness, competence, and confidence).

These are some sample questions to address the impact of an event. They are not mandatory, and you may pick and choose the questions that best fit the context, and change them as needed to fit the situation and your style of interacting.

- **Cover:** How has the incident affected your sense of safety?
- **Calm:** What changes have occurred regarding sleep, feelings of being on edge, or ability to keep calm? What helps?
- **Connection:** Has there been an impact on how you talk with each other, work morale, or connecting with family and friends? Is there someone you feel comfortable talking with about this? Has anyone you know done or said something that really helped? Does anyone here feel the need for any practical support right now?
- **Competence:** Do you have any concerns about being able to handle what’s going on in your life, deal with your stress reactions, or do your work? What are some things that you have done to cope that have been helpful in the past, or have been helpful since this incident?
- **Confidence:** Have you noticed any change in your confidence in your ability to do your job in the same way as before the event, or your confidence in leadership? Are you feeling guilty or wish you had done something differently? Does this incident hold special meaning or connect with other experiences in any way? What can we learn from this event?

After the discussion prompted by the questions, you can include a short discussion about the importance of being particularly disciplined in self-care and looking out for each other for a period of time, including participating in more healthy forms of coping, being diligent about getting enough sleep by reducing any distractions that one can control, minimizing negative coping (such as isolation, using alcohol or substances to sleep), and making use of available resources. Finally, ask if there is any other support they need.
**Summary**

SFA actions are to be used *as needed* for yourself or with coworkers who are experiencing either significant distress or decrements in functioning. They should be incorporated into duties in a natural, seamless way, and implemented *only* when needed. The table below gives a summary of actions you could take to provide each of the seven SFA core actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SFA ACTIONS</th>
<th>POSSIBLE STRATEGIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Continuous</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Check | • Assess current level of distress and functioning  
• Assess immediate risks  
• Assess need for additional SFA interventions or higher levels of care  
• Reassess progress |
| Coordinate | • Decide who else should be informed of the situation  
• Refer for further evaluation or higher levels of care, if indicated  
• Facilitate access to other needed care |
| **As Needed** | |
| Cover | • Ensure immediate physical safety of stress-affected person and others  
• Foster a psychological sense of safety  
• Protect the person from additional stress |
| Calm | • Reduce physiological arousal (slow heart rate and breathing, relax)  
• Reduce intensity of negative emotions such as fear or anger  
• Listen empathically to the person talk about his or her experiences  
• Give information that calms |
| Connect | • Be a support, or encourage a connection to supportive others  
• Help the person problem-solve to remove obstacles to social support  
• Foster positive social activities and practical support |
| Competence | • Help mentor the person back to full functioning  
• Facilitate rewarding work roles and retraining, if necessary  
• Help the person problem-solve ways to deal with their own stress reactions  
• Encourage gradual re-exposure to potentially stressful situations |
| Confidence | • Mentor the person back to full confidence in self, leadership, and/or core values  
• Discuss any obstacles to confidence, such as the person’s sense of guilt or anger, and if possible, shift them to a lessons learned perspective  
• Find out how the person makes meaning regarding their experiences, or connect them with someone who can |