

# STRESS FIRST AID MODEL HANDOUT

*This handout is to accompany the Stress First Aid Response presentation developed by Dr. Joanna Cheek and Dr Ruth Stewart, and adapted from the work of Dr. Patricia Watson from the US Department of Veterans Affairs.*

This model of Stress First Aid (SFA) was originally developed for use with military and law enforcement personnel, recognizing that these professions encounter serious stressors as an ongoing part of their work. Health care providers have a similar experience, which has been further intensified by the pandemic. The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a self-care and peer support framework that includes seven actions that can help you identify and address early signs of stress reactions in yourself and others in an ongoing way (not just after single “critical incidents”). It is a model for both short-term recovery and longer-term resilience.

Central to the Stress First Aid module is the stress continuum, which is a visual tool for assessing your own and others' stress responses. The crux of the stress continuum model is that stress responses lay along a spectrum of severity and type. Every person will react when faced with stressors that are severe, personal, or extended. During the course of reaction and recovery, a person's state can change from Green to Yellow to Orange to Red zone, and back again.

READY (Green)	REACTING (Yellow)	INJURED (Orange)	ILL (Red)
<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Optimal functioning</li> <li>Adaptive growth</li> <li>Wellness</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At one’s best</li> <li>Well-trained and prepared</li> <li>In control</li> <li>Physically, mentally and spiritually fit</li> <li>Mission-focused</li> <li>Motivated</li> <li>Calm and steady</li> <li>Having fun</li> <li>Behaving ethically</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mild and transient distress or impairment</li> <li>Always goes away</li> <li>Low risk</li> </ul> <p><b>CAUSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any stressor</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling irritable, anxious or down</li> <li>Loss of motivation</li> <li>Loss of focus</li> <li>Difficulty sleeping</li> <li>Muscle tension or other physical changes</li> <li>Not having fun</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More severe and persistent distress or impairment</li> <li>Leaves an emotional/mental “scar”</li> <li>Higher risk</li> </ul> <p><b>CAUSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life threat</li> <li>LOSS</li> <li>Moral injury</li> <li>Wear and tear</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loss of control</li> <li>Panic, rage or depression</li> <li>No longer feeling like normal self</li> <li>Excessive guilt, shame or blame</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clinical mental disorder</li> <li>Unhealed stress injury causing life impairment</li> </ul> <p><b>TYPES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTSD</li> <li>Depression</li> <li>Anxiety</li> <li>Substance abuse</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Symptoms persist and worsen over time</li> <li>Severe distress or social or occupational impairment</li> <li>Hopelessness</li> </ul>

A key goal of this model is to reduce stigma. We often expect ourselves and each other to be ready or “in the green” at all times, but the reality is that we are cycling through these colors all the time.

### Your Stress Signature

We all have different “stress signatures”, or patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating that show up when we are distressed. While everyone’s stress signature is unique, we tend to react to stress with similar patterns each time we are faced with stressful situations. We can learn to identify and monitor ourselves for these unique stress signs to help us quickly recognize when we are moving towards the right of the stress continuum.

It can be helpful to reflect on and identify what stress looks like for you:

	READY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
What thought and emotions do you notice?				
What behaviours do you notice?				
How are your relationships impacted?				
What is happening in your body?				

### Core actions of the Stress First Aid Model

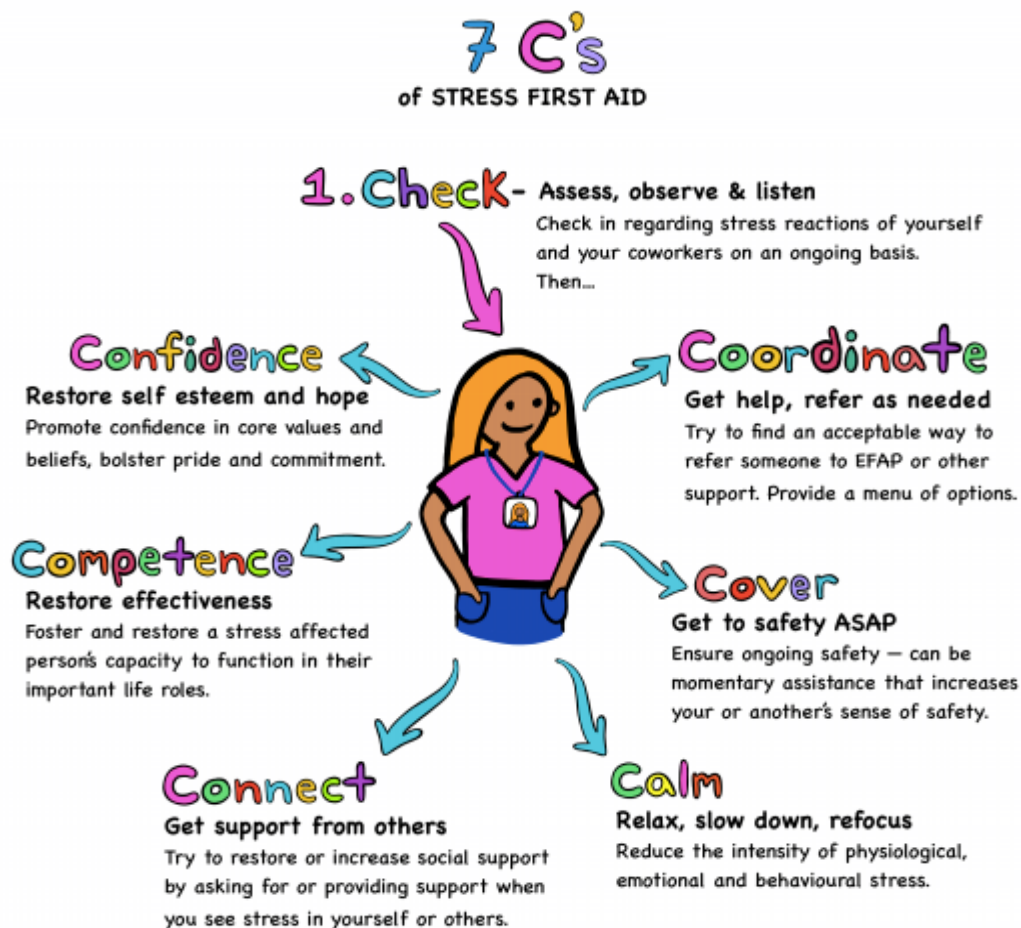
Stress First Aid is based on a set of five evidence-based elements that have been linked to better functioning after stress and adversity. These elements are:

1. **COVER** - Regaining a sense of both physical and psychological safety.
2. **CALM** – Reducing the intensity of physiological, emotional and behavioral stress reactions.
3. **CONNECTION** - Feeling connected to sources of nourishing social support

4. **COMPETENCE** - Increasing a sense of self-efficacy (feeling competent to handle situations and emotions).
5. **CONFIDENCE** - Experiencing hope, or confidence, in yourself, your community, and the world.

**CHECK** is the starting point, recognizing that we can't address what we aren't aware of or don't acknowledge. We need to be observing ourselves and others for signs of stress.

**COORDINATE** is about thoughtfully linking to supports as needed. The five C's above are part of our natural resilience processes for recovering from stressful events – we often do them without even thinking. Sometimes however, these recovery processes get overtaken by the nature of the stressors, or they just don't have time to kick in when stress is prolonged. It happens to everyone. This is where coordinate comes in – being more intentional about the recovery processes that are falling off, knowing when to get help with them, and learning how to help others or connect them with trustworthy sources of help.



## Check Actions:

**Pause:** In prolonged crisis mode, we can get so caught up in doing and reacting that we lose sight of what is happening within and around us. Pause doesn't have to be long, just long enough to take stock.

**Observe:** What am I feeling? What am I doing? What are others doing around me? Am I noticing Irritability, frustration, feeling checked out, or making mistakes? Where are you on the stress continuum? Where is your co-worker, your team?

### **Approach with nonjudgmental curiosity**

- If you see something, say something
- State your observations - just the facts, without interpretations or judgments
- State why you are concerned about the behaviour
- Try to understand the other person's perception of the behaviours

### **Respond:**

- What do I need? What do you need?
- What can I/we do to help?
- Provide the other C's below as needed.

## Coordinate Actions

Involves: getting help or more information, referring to outside resources as needed, in the most respectful and acceptable way for the individual.

### **Signs that external resources might be appropriate:**

- The person desires it.
- They (you) are in the red zone, or in the orange zone and have been for a while.
- The need is beyond the capacity of peers.

### **Resources to consider:**

- Trusted friend or family member
- Supervisor, team lead
- Spiritual health
- Employee Assistance Program, Physician Health Program
- BC Psychological Association, Psychological First Aid

## Cover Actions

Cover is about safety: physical safety and psychological safety. A constant state of overwhelming fear and threat is hard on the body, leading to exhaustion and illness. In order to cope with the intolerable sensations, our minds may check out with avoidance and disconnection, making it more difficult to pay attention in situations where it is needed.

- 1) Take breaks from high stress, high demand environments, so your body and nervous system can recover. This may look like ensuring your workplace has a breakroom where it is possible to let down your guard a little. Create these spaces at home as well.
- 2) Seek out and provide the most accurate and credible information about risk. Listening to and talking about only worst-case horror stories undermines the ability of both you and your team to manage stress and choose wise actions.
- 3) Learn, teach, and follow good safety procedures, and remind each other that you are doing things that are in your control to protect yourself and others. Doffing and donning buddies for PPE can be one way to do this.
- 4) Do your part to make your workplace a space that is kind, tolerant, and inclusive. If you don't have psychological safety at work, ensure you connect with safe friends and family regularly.

## Calm Actions

Calming is about reducing the intensity of physiological, emotional, and behavioural stress reactions - both in the moment and with practices for long-term sustainability.

Practice these yourself, model them, encourage and support others:

- Just in time interventions meet immediate needs.
  - Grounding exercises help you get out of your head (worries about the future, fretting over the past) and connect with the present moment. This calms you, helps you notice what needs attention (e.g. bodily needs) and also helps you return to a more effective state of focus.
    - Pause, drop your shoulders back, sit or stand up straight. What hurts? What could use a stretch, a different position?
    - Look around, take an inventory of your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel/touch?
    - Attend in detail to the physical sensations and sequences of regular activities, such as handwashing, doffing and donning PPE, eating a snack.
  - Does your body have what it needs to function: food, water, rest? When was the last time you or your team member ate, drank water, got to use the bathroom, sat down?
  - Calm your body intentionally with skills that settle your nervous system quickly:

- Paced breathing: With one hand on the chest and one hand on the belly, with each breath try to breath more from the belly (diaphragmatic breathing). Slow down the breath and try making the outbreath longer than the in breath.
  - If you have the option, try brief intense exercise such as walking up the stairs.
  - If available and feasible, ice or very cold water on the face can rapidly settle escalating feelings of distress (check with your doctor first if you have a heart condition).
- Thinking interventions help you turn the way you think into an advantage, rather than a stressor:
    - Focus on what is in your power to control, rather than ruminating about what is out of your control.
    - Taking in the good is a practice of balancing the negatives that naturally draw our attention by intentionally noticing and giving time to goodness. This may be good news, acts of kindness, things of beauty – whatever reminds you that the world is not 100% dangerous and ugly.
    - Mental hygiene means being thoughtful about what you consume. Consider limiting exposure to social media, choosing one or two trusted sources of information and looking at them once a day. Make a conscious habit of taking in accurate information about risk.
    - Practice compassion for yourself and others. Compassion isn't an emotion you try to summon, but rather a choice to remember that we are all human, all uncertain and messy, and we all want the same things: to feel safe and secure, to be healthy, to be happy, to be loved, to know our loved ones are well. Give yourself and others the benefit of the doubt for having stress responses.
  - Body-Mind Maintenance: This is a marathon, not a sprint and the race started before we knew we were supposed to train. We can start to make time for practices that keep us resilient in the long haul, such as sleep, play, exercise, rest, nutrition, and mindfulness practices such as yoga or meditation. This is about doing what works to stay healthy, and revising as needed, not beating ourselves up with unrealistic resolutions.

## Connect Actions

Connection involves actively restoring or increasing nourishing social support and contact. Connection helps us in many ways:

- Co-regulation refers to the idea that calm and kindness are contagious, both emotionally and physically. Seek out calm and grounded people, and when you are able, remember how valuable that kind of presence can be for your team.
- Belonging to a group enhances an individual's sense of safety and multiplies the resources for problem solving and tangible support. It can be tempting to isolate under stress, but this undermines our unconscious sense of safety.

- Reach out to those who may be vulnerable and isolated and be open to receiving outreach from others.
- Be aware that experiences of prejudice or hardship might make some people wary of connection. Reach out anyway, but be sensitive – ask permission, respect cultural differences.
- Clear boundaries help to ensure that connection is positive and sustainable. It is OK to say no, and to share the supportive role with others.
- Remember that connection also includes expert resources such as counselling and medical care.

## Competence Actions

The anxiety equation states that worry and stress are proportional to our estimation of the size of the risk divided by our estimation of our ability to cope with it. We have already talked about ways to be more accurate in thinking about risk. Competence is about our belief in our skills to cope, solve problems, and obtain resources. Competence can be individual, but it is also a quality of teams and communities that pool their skills and resources. Actions that support competence include:

- Identifying skill gaps and learning new skills builds competence. We are all in a position of having to do unfamiliar things – we can address this proactively by seeking out or asking for training.
- Taking some time to engage in activities where we feel confident of our skills: this can help to remind us how capable we really are.
- Teaching and mentoring peers improves their competence and reconnects us with our own.
- Remembering past times where we have coped with unfamiliar situations and unexpected stressors can boost our feelings of competence.
- Working as a group to increase access to resources increases our faith in the competence of our community.

## Confidence Actions

Confidence taps into ideas of hope, optimism, values, and meaning. It goes beyond just meeting the demands of the next task in front of us and reminds us why we do what we do. This may look like:

- Reconnecting with our values and deciding how to live those out in our daily lives at home and at work. Sometimes the constraints of a crisis may challenge the ways we thought we were going to practice those values, and we may want to connect with trusted friends, a counsellor, an elder or spiritual advisor to help us recover our bearings.
- Practicing gratitude, remembering the good.
- Practicing kindness and compassion – helping others find hope and optimism can powerfully enhance our own ability to feel it.

## Remember:

- Stress responses are normal during this time
- This is a marathon, not a sprint
- Our values and ideals as HCW can get in the way of taking care of ourselves
- We need self-care and team care - sometimes looking out for each other is more likely to happen than taking time for ourselves.
- We need to be aware of the signs of stress vulnerability in ourselves and others and actively check in. The stress continuum is a shorthand for sharing how we and others are doing

**Cover:** how has this experience affected your sense of safety?

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**Calm:** what changes have occurred regarding sleep or ability to keep calm?

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**Connect:** Has there been an impact on how you connect with others?

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**Competence:** Do you have any concerns about being unable to do anything?

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**Confidence:** Have you noticed any change in your confidence in yourself, leadership, equipment?

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What C's do I need right now?

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What actions can I take to better support myself and others?

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