



National Center for  
**PTSD**

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Police Officer Toolkit

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## Stress First Aid (SFA) for Law Enforcement

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 will help 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 law enforcement jobs, SFA has been developed to be used 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 visual tool for assessing your own and others' stress responses. It forms the foundation for SFA, which was first developed for Navy and Marine Corps Servicemembers.

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 severe enough or extended enough stress. However, the way in which a person responds will depend on his or her preparation for and interpretation of the stressor events. During the course of this response, a person's state can change from Green to Yellow to Orange to Red zone, and back again.



**Figure 1: The Stress Continuum Model**

<b>READY (Green)</b>	<b>REACTING (Yellow)</b>	<b>INJURED (Orange)</b>	<b>ILL (Red)</b>
<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>• <b>LOSS</b></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>

Police officers may try to conceal stress reactions from supervisors because they fear stigma and because they want to avoid medical or psychological intervention. However, recognizing the signs of Orange zone stress in oneself or a fellow officer and taking steps to lessen the severity is important. Practicing self-care or helping connect a fellow officer with a trusted support 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:

- **Life Threat:** Feeling as if self or others are in a life-threatening situation. In law enforcement work, life threat can also 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:** Inner conflict can result from acting outside of one's morals or values; from an inability to prevent harm to others; or through contributing to or not preventing harm to a fellow officer. Indications for inner conflict include the words: "could've, should've, why me, 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 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.

Figure 2: The Stress First Aid Model's Core Actions



## 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

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*.

## 1) **Check:** Assess –Observe and Listen

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.

## 2) **Coordinate:** Get Help, Refer as Needed

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 on line until help arrives. If possible, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255** to speak to a crisis counselor.

### 3) Cover: Restore Sense of Safety

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

- **Standing** by 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 officers and their families via a greater commitment to organizational safety and order.

#### Cover Example

Two officers respond to a shooting. The man who answers the door has a gun in his hand and starts shooting as he is opening the door. The inexperienced officer runs back to safety behind a wall. The senior officer walks backwards as the man is shooting, providing cover to the younger officer until they both reach safety. The younger officer says he feels guilty for running. The senior officer says, "I'm glad you ran away – that was your only opportunity to get safe. If you had reacted by shooting it would have put us both in more danger, and by you getting yourself safe, I didn't have to worry about you and could keep a calm head until I got to you."



#### 4) **Calm:** Relax, Slow Down, Refocus

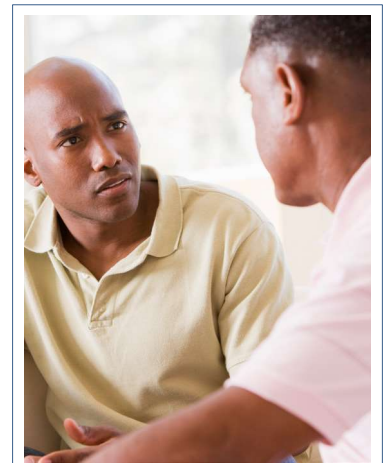
The goal of the Calm action in SFA is to reduce the intensity of physiological, emotional and behavioral stress. There is overlap between the actions of Cover and Calm, but the difference is that the primary goal of Cover is safety, and Calm actions may have no direct connection with safety. Calm actions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

#### 5) **Connect:** Get Support from Others

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.



### Connect Example

A department was involved in a civilian being shot by an officer. Officers were concerned that they couldn't speak about the incident amongst themselves until after a grand jury investigation. The Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) was called in because its members could maintain confidentiality. Because the CIRT members were trained in the SFA model, they were able to discuss with officers how the incident had impacted sense of safety, sense of calm, relationships, and sense of competence and competence without discussing the details of the event. In the meantime, the superintendent in charge of internal affairs made the rapid completion of the investigation a high priority.

## 6) Competence: Restore Effectiveness

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.

### Competence Example

A commanding officer makes sure to mentor his crew when they are showing signs of Orange zone stress, by giving them respite, training, or advice. If things get worse, he is not afraid to tell them that if they keep going without getting some help, they're going to lose their job, family, or life. He sent one officer to an inpatient mental health treatment for suicidality, and got another help for a painkiller habit she developed after shoulder surgery. He also has someone in the department screen and interview local mental health professionals, so he is confident that when he refers his officers to treatment, they are getting names of providers who are well trained and who understand the law enforcement culture.

## 7) Confidence: Restore Self-Esteem and Hope



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.

### Confidence Example

A number of agencies were involved in an active shooter situation. At the conclusion of the incident, a lot of the junior officers who were involved were concerned about what they could have done differently. A senior officer established an after-action review using senior peers, because he knew that only respected senior peers would be able to guide the younger officers away from blaming themselves for things. The senior peers were in the best position to let the junior officers know that everyone goes through similar situations and the right approach is to learn from all calls rather than blaming or second-guessing ones self.



## 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).



Figure 3: The Stress First Aid Model

## Summary

SFA actions are to be used as needed for yourself or with coworkers who are experiencing either significant distress or problems 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.

Continuous	
SFA ACTIONS	POSSIBLE STRATEGIES
<b>Check</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess current level of distress and functioning</li> <li>• Assess immediate risks</li> <li>• Assess need for additional SFA interventions or higher levels of care</li> <li>• Reassess progress</li> </ul>
<b>Coordinate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide who else should be informed of the situation</li> <li>• Refer for further evaluation or higher levels of care, if indicated</li> <li>• Facilitate access to other needed care</li> </ul>

As Needed	
SFA ACTIONS	POSSIBLE STRATEGIES
<b>Cover</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure immediate physical safety of stress-affected person and others</li> <li>• Foster a psychological sense of safety</li> <li>• Protect the person from additional stress</li> </ul>
<b>Calm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce physiological arousal (slow heart rate and breathing, relax)</li> <li>• Reduce intensity of negative emotions such as fear or anger</li> <li>• Listen empathically to the person talk about his or her experiences</li> <li>• Give information that calms</li> </ul>
<b>Connect</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be a support, or encourage a connection to supportive others</li> <li>• Help the person problem-solve to remove obstacles to social support</li> <li>• Foster positive social activities and practical support</li> </ul>
<b>Competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help mentor the person back to full functioning</li> <li>• Facilitate rewarding work roles and retraining, if necessary</li> <li>• Help the person problem-solve ways to deal with their own stress reactions</li> <li>• Encourage gradual re-exposure to potentially stressful situations</li> </ul>
<b>Confidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor the person back to full confidence in self, leadership, and/or core values</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• Find out how the person makes meaning regarding their experiences, or connect them with someone who can</li> </ul>