

Guidelines for Caring for Staff and Volunteers in Crises



www.ifrc.org
Saving lives, changing minds.

Psychosocial Centre



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Crises and psychosocial support.....	4
Reactions to crises.....	5
Risks to staff and volunteer well-being.....	5
Using these guidelines.....	8
Individual and group support meetings.....	8
Individual support meetings.....	9
Considerations for support meetings.....	12
Preparing for meetings.....	12
During support meetings.....	13
Ending a meeting.....	17
After meetings.....	18

Front page photo: International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies

Suggested citation: *Guidelines for Caring for Staff and Volunteers in Crises*, IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, Copenhagen, 2019.

Please contact the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support if you wish to translate, or adapt any part of Psychological First Aid for the Red Cross Red Crescent Societies. We welcome your comments, suggestions and feedback at: psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org

The IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support is hosted and supported by Danish Red Cross

© International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support 2019

Psychosocial Centre

 International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies



Introduction

Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers work in difficult, complex and sometimes dangerous environments. They help people during and after crises providing them with practical help, understanding and social and emotional support.

Helping fellow human beings gives meaning, purpose and provides direction even in the face of adversity. However, the urgency of addressing the acute needs of affected populations can overshadow the fact that those responding are also exposed to loss, devastation, injury and death. Staff and volunteers may be deeply affected by witnessing pain and suffering and they are often directly affected by the same crisis they are responding to.

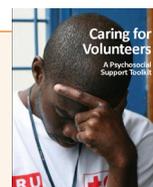
Providing psychosocial support to staff and volunteers is an essential part of honouring the obligation to care for their well-being. An added benefit is that providing care and recognition to staff and volunteers also often leads to increased recruitment and retention. Better care inspires and motivates staff and volunteers and ultimately leads to better performance.

Managers or team leaders, such as volunteer or youth group leaders, can play an important role in creating a supportive environment by showing concern for staff and volunteers and encouraging peer support. Being part of a supportive team with open communication that promotes help-seeking behaviour when needed prevents isolation, and can reduce the likelihood of acute distress reactions developing into longer-term distress.

Guidelines for caring for staff and volunteers after crisis outline different ways of giving recognition and psychosocial support through various types of support meetings. Support after crisis events aims at promoting well-being and better coping. It is most effective when adapted to the context, the organization and the style and competencies of the manager or team leader.

Toolkit for caring for volunteers

More information on how to implement caring for staff and volunteer practices can be found in *Caring for Volunteers: A psychosocial support toolkit*, available from the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support. This toolkit describes in detail the support system that National Societies should set up before, during and after a crisis. It describes the steps for implementing policies, structures and practices and contains a curriculum for a two-day training for managers. The toolkit and the accompanying training materials are available in French, English, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic on the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support website: www.pscentre.org.



Crises and psychosocial support

A crisis can be a single event or a series of events that lead to major changes in the lives of those affected. Crises fall outside the range of normal everyday experiences. They are often threatening to those involved, and can be accompanied by feelings of powerlessness, horror or intense fear. When an individual is involved with, witnesses or is repeatedly confronted with violence or crisis events that carry a risk of death or injury to self and others, they can be left feeling overwhelmed by fear, helplessness and a loss of security.

Being involved directly in or witnessing traffic accidents, acts of violence, fires or mass accidents at sports events are examples of crisis events. Others include natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, cyclones or man-made crises such as war and conflicts, population displacements and large-scale accidents.

The need to address the psychological wounds inflicted during crises with psychological and social support has been increasingly recognized and acknowledged and is now considered essential to the post-crisis response. During the 1990s, psychosocial support in emergencies developed into a specific technical field. Psychosocial support refers to actions that address both the emotional and social needs of individuals, with the aim of helping people to use their own resources in order to maximise their resilience. Caring for staff and volunteers is an important responsibility for organizations responding to crisis situations such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Providing psychosocial support to staff and volunteers is one way of making sure that staff and volunteers are cared for in the right way.

Most people who experience crises cope well. Many have temporary distress reactions but this is normal and expected. Psychosocial support and the opportunity to

talk about their experiences and reactions can help facilitate recovery and coping. They are able to maintain their psychosocial well-being and do not suffer any long-term negative psychological effects. It is only a small percentage of those involved that are at risk of developing mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression.



Photo: Juozas Cernius, IFRC

Reactions to crises

How staff and volunteers react to crisis situations depends on:

- the nature of the event – what happened and how they were involved and/or affected
- the severity of the event – how severe the consequences were, especially in terms of loss and life changes
- how long the event lasted
- whether or not they have experienced something similar before
- the kind of work they are doing and how close they were to the scene of the emergency
- the support system around them
- their physical health
- their pre-existing state of mental health
- their cultural background and traditions, which impacts on their behaviour, actions and communication
- their age, as younger staff and volunteers may be vulnerable.

Risks to staff and volunteer well-being

Specific risks to staff and volunteer well-being among those who respond to crisis situations are briefly described below. Staff and volunteers may be affected on a personal and interpersonal level, and by their working conditions as well as by organizational issues.

Personal risks

Some staff and volunteers may develop idealistic or unrealistic expectations of what they can do to help others. For example, they may feel they should solve all the problems facing the people they seek to support. This can lead to feelings of guilt when they realize they are unable to do this. They may also feel guilty if someone they were helping dies, or about prioritizing their own need for rest or support. Some staff and volunteers may also face moral or ethical dilemmas in their roles of helping others, such as having to choose whose needs are most pressing and should be handled as a priority.

Interpersonal risks

Challenges experienced at an interpersonal level that can pose risks to staff and volunteer well-being include feeling unsupported by colleagues or supervisors, experiencing difficult dynamics within a team or working with team members who are stressed or burned out.

Risks related to working conditions

Working conditions in crisis situations are often challenging. Staff and volunteers may have to perform physically difficult, exhausting and sometimes dangerous tasks, or be expected (or expect themselves) to work long hours in difficult circumstances. Working this way may make them feel detached from their own family and home life

because they cannot share the details of such experiences at home. They may also feel they did not deal with their tasks adequately and/or that they were not adequately prepared for facing the frustration and anger of affected people who feel their needs are not being met. Witnessing traumatic events or hearing survivors' stories of trauma and loss can also be very difficult.

Risks related to organizational issues

Organizational issues that can impact staff and volunteer well-being include having an unclear or non-existent job description or an unclear role in the team. Other risk factors are lack of information sharing, being poorly prepared or briefed for tasks, lacking boundaries between work and rest and working in a context where well-being is not valued and efforts are not acknowledged or appreciated.

Signs and symptoms of distress

Most staff and volunteers, like others affected by crises, will have normal acute distress reactions and will recover without any long-term negative impact. However, occasionally reactions to crises persist in a way that interferes with day-to-day functioning. Recognizing signs of severe distress is a key skill in providing support. The first signs of severe distress are usually changes in behaviour or personality. Managers should be attentive to staff or volunteers showing signs of distress. These may include withdrawing from others, work and social activities; appearing anxious or agitated, or appearing to be 'low' to an extent that interferes with day-to-day functioning. A comprehensive list of common signs and symptoms of distress is shown in Table 1.



Photo: Syrian Arab Red Crescent

PHYSICAL

Problems with sleeping
 Stomach problems like diarrhea or nausea
 Rapid heart rate
 Feeling very tired
 Muscle tremors and tension
 Back and neck pain due to muscle tension
 Headaches
 Inability to relax and rest
 Being frightened very easily

EMOTIONAL

Mood swings: feeling happy one moment and sad the next moment
 Feeling over-emotional
 Being quickly irritated
 Anger
 Depression, sadness
 Anxiety
 Not feeling any emotions

MENTAL

Poor concentration
 Feeling confused
 Disorganised thoughts
 Forgetting things quickly
 Difficult making decisions
 Dreams or nightmares
 Intrusive and involuntary thoughts

SPIRITUAL

Feelings of emptiness
 Loss of meaning
 Feeling discouraged and loss of hope
 Increasingly negative about life
 Doubt
 Anger at God
 Alienation and loss of sense of connection

BEHAVIOURAL

Risk-taking e.g. driving recklessly
 Over-eating or under-eating
 Increased smoking
 Having no energy at all
 Hyper-alertness
 Aggression and verbal outbursts
 Alcohol or drug use
 Compulsive behaviour, i.e. nervous tics and pacing
 Withdrawal and isolation

Using these guidelines

These guidelines can be used as a resource for different forms of support meetings for individuals or groups. The format chosen depends on the needs of those affected, the context and situation, and what the manager or team leader feels competent to handle. Short meetings and gatherings that happen spontaneously can be held by people without a background or training in psychosocial support. However, more structured psychological first aid (PFA) and support meetings are most effective when led by individuals with training and experience in providing PFA and group facilitation.

Preparation before any support meeting is essential and can be done alone or with a colleague. For all types of support meetings, it is essential that there is trust and open communication between the team leader and the individual or group. If there is any disagreement or mistrust between the manager and volunteers or staff, then another trusted person who is seen as neutral should be identified to provide the support. If needed, the manager or group leader can, for example, introduce the meeting and thank the participants for their attendance and then let another more experienced facilitator continue.

Support meetings versus regular team meetings

Support meetings differ from regular team meetings in the following ways. Regular team meetings are used to provide updates, plan, supervise, and support the work of staff and volunteers involved in a programme. They provide structure in the working lives of staff and volunteers, giving them a space to discuss challenges and achievements in their work. Regular team meetings also enable managers to gauge gaps in skills and knowledge among staff and volunteers. Managers may use team meetings to provide guidance to their teams about dealing with the challenges they face. They may use this time too to recognize individual and team efforts, and to promote good self and team care strategies. Support meetings, on the other hand, are specifically for providing support, either to an individual or a group, because the manager or team leader has judged that it is needed. These meetings aim to address emotional and social needs and to promote social cohesion and inclusion. They also provide the team leader or manager with an opportunity to assess if additional and/or other support is needed.

Individual and group support meetings

Support meetings can be with one person or with a group of people. Both individual and group meetings can be short spontaneous meetings called at the spur of the moment because the manager recognizes a need for them. Alternatively, they can be planned and prepared in advance with a more formal structure, where time is allocated for specific actions and activities.

The different kinds of support meetings are described below to enable managers to choose the format that suits their situation best.

Individual support meetings

The purpose of an individual support meeting is to create a safe space, where a staff member or a volunteer can talk about their experiences or feelings of distress. It is an opportunity for the manager to help normalize reactions to distressing events, encourage social support, promote help seeking behaviour and focus on positive coping strategies. In some cases, referral to other services or sources of help may be made.

Staff and volunteers may need individual support if, for example, they have witnessed or experienced a distressing event that has severely affected them or if they have experienced a personal crisis or loss. It may be more appropriate in this case to meet with someone individually if sensitive issues need to be discussed. For example, it may be that a person feels that they have been treated badly in the workplace, or they may have faced a moral dilemma while on duty which has severely impacted them. A manager may suggest an individual support meeting if they see the person exhibiting signs and symptoms of distress (see examples above in Table 1) or if they know the person has been involved in a work-related or personal crisis. Staff or volunteers can also approach a manager themselves and request individual support. Reacting positively to such requests and making time to talk is a signal of care and interest. Individual support meetings usually take from 15 minutes to an hour depending on the situation. A short initial meeting may be adequate to just check in with the colleague and assess how they are doing. If they seem to be experiencing normal reactions and using positive coping mechanisms to manage their feelings and reactions they may not need further support. If, however, they seem to be struggling and finding it hard to function, be with others and manage their emotions, they may need to talk more and the manager may choose to provide psychological first aid.

Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a psychosocial support activity that can be carried out by all staff and volunteers and can help both individuals and groups. The IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support recommends training in PFA to strengthen knowledge and skills in helping others in distress.

PFA is a humane way of helping people in distress so that they feel calm and supported to better cope with their challenges, manage their situation and make informed decisions. It involves paying attention to the person's reactions, active listening and if needed, practical assistance, such as problem solving or help to access basic needs.

PFA involves:

- providing practical care and support which is not intrusive
- assessing needs and concerns
- helping people access basic needs such as food, water or shelter
- listening to people without pressuring them to talk
- helping people access information, services and social support
- protecting people from further harm.

PFA aims to reduce initial distress, meet current needs, promote flexible coping and encourage adjustment. Being listened to in an empathetic manner and having one's

efforts recognized are helpful factors. Having practical help in managing the situation and making informed decisions is equally important. This approach is informed by five intervention principles developed by Hobfoll and colleagues (2007). They include promoting

- a sense of safety
- calming
- a sense of self- and collective resources
- connectedness
- hope.

PFA uses three key action principles, 'Look, Listen and Link' as prompts for staff and volunteers in applying PFA. All staff and volunteers can learn these actions and know how to apply them. It is of course important to know that in the real world these actions may be applied in different sequences, depending on the situation. At times, some actions may actually be done at the same time or may have to be repeated several times. This depends on the situation and the needs of the persons affected by the crisis event.



LOOK for

- information on what has happened and is happening
- who needs help
- safety and security risks
- physical injuries
- immediate basic and practical needs
- emotional reactions.

LISTEN refers to how the helper

- approaches someone
- introduces oneself
- pays attention and listens actively
- accepts others' feelings
- calms the person in distress
- asks about needs and concerns
- helps the person(s) in distress find solutions to their immediate needs and problems.

LINK is helping people

- access information
- connect with loved ones and social support
- tackle practical problems
- access services and other help.

See the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support's materials on Psychological First Aid for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for more on PFA. The package of materials consists of

- *A Guide to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*
- *A Short Introduction to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*

Training in Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies:

- *Module 1. An introduction to PFA (4 to 5 hours)*
- *Module 2. Basic PFA (8 to 9 hours)*
- *Module 3. PFA for Children (8 to 9 hours)*
- *Module 4: PFA in Groups – Support to teams (21 hours – three days)*

Initial assessment meeting

There are a number of different ways of providing support to groups of staff and volunteers. One is similar to the short meeting described above for individuals, where the manager calls a quick meeting with the team to check in and assess how everyone is doing. This may be necessary if the team has been working hard for many days with little rest, and/or has worked together in a difficult, challenging situation or crisis. Managers can use this meeting to assess if individuals or the team need more support. The manager may conclude that the team is all well and does not need further support, or it may be decided to follow this initial short meeting with an informal or formal gathering to show appreciation, or with a PFA and support meeting.

Informal and formal gatherings

An important way of supporting a team is to show appreciation and recognition for their efforts and hard work. This can be done in various ways. For example, manager may gather staff and volunteers together informally at short notice. These types of informal gatherings may include some refreshments and enables managers to make a short speech of appreciation to their teams. They may also give information relevant to the situation teams are facing. It is also important that team members have the opportunity of saying a few words too. More formal gatherings can also be used to show staff and volunteers appreciation for their work. These types of gatherings need to be well prepared and usually follow a planned structure. They may include speeches and the presentation of letters of appreciation or certificates to acknowledge the efforts of staff and volunteers. Actions such as presenting letters of appreciation signed by the manager or National Society branch secretary is a simple yet powerful way of showing appreciation and recognition. This gives staff and volunteers perspective, dignity and meaning in their work.

PFA and support meetings

If the team has been involved in a very stressful or dramatic response, or if some of the team members show signs and/or symptoms of distress, the manager may decide to arrange a group PFA and support meeting. Such a meeting will typically take place two or three days after the event. It is recommended not to exceed 14 days before arranging a response. The manager or team leader may oversee this meeting directly or arrange for another facilitator who is trained in providing PFA in groups to join or run the meet-

ing. Providing PFA to a group involves the same action principles of ‘Look, Listen and Link,’ but with added elements and skills needed due to the group setting. The facilitator(s) of a PFA and support meeting needs to be able to communicate with the group in a manner which ensures that everyone feels heard and included; manage group dynamics and interactions; draw on strengths and resources of individuals and of the group as a unit; encourage and enable peer support; handle difficult reactions and disclosures, and provide relevant psycho-education to the group.

A PFA and support meeting should provide a safe space for participants to talk about their experiences and feelings in a supportive environment, where others listen without judgement, and where reactions to crisis events are normalized, peer support is encouraged and information about available support systems is shared.

Participants gain perspective from hearing others share their experiences and feelings, and from learning about others’ positive coping mechanisms. Providing PFA in groups helps to promote social cohesion and connectedness, and is a platform for developing or strengthening already-existing social and peer support, for example, through buddy systems. It can be reassuring for participants to know that there are others who are experiencing some of the same challenges as them, and in this way, they can inspire and learn from each other. PFA and support meetings give participants an opportunity to talk about how they are doing in greater detail and to exchange tips for positive coping.

PFA and support meetings should be long enough to allow all participants to share, discuss normal reactions to the event or situation they have experienced (psycho-education), discuss ideas for positive coping and receive information on where they can access additional support if needed. Depending upon the number of participants, PFA and support meetings can take from 45 minutes (three to five participants) to two hours (10 participants). It is recommended that there are about 10 participants in such a meeting. If a group of volunteers that usually work together has more than 10 members, the facilitator should try to accommodate this in order to keep the group together. If there are a lot more than 10 people who would benefit from a group PFA and support meeting, it is a good idea to hold multiple meetings.

Considerations for support meetings

Preparing for meetings

What support is needed?

The process and content of a support meeting should be planned after an assessment of the situation and the needs of participants. It is important to consider what type of crisis has taken place and how it may have impacted on those involved. This can help the manager decide whether it is best to call individual support meetings, prepare a gathering to show appreciation and recognition or prepare to run a PFA and support meeting.

Venue

It is best to hold support meetings, whether individual or group, in a venue that is private and secure where all participants feel safe and comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings.

Refreshments

Providing refreshments is an important part of support meetings as this demonstrates that participants' needs have been considered. When possible, provide water and/or tea or coffee and something light to eat.

Timing

As indicated above, initial short support meetings with individuals or groups can be held during or immediately after a crisis event, as these are mainly used to assess how those affected are doing and whether there is a need for more structured and lengthy support meetings. Gatherings for appreciation and recognition are usually held after a response to a crisis event has been concluded. Group PFA and support meetings are also usually held at least two to three days after a crisis event has ended if possible, to allow for some time to pass for normal coping mechanisms to be activated and for social support systems from peers, friends, family and community to take effect. They should preferably be held within a 14-day period. This maximises the preventative impact that is made possible through informational, social, emotional, and possibly practical support.

Knowing that a support meeting is planned, when it will take place and what will happen at the meeting can contribute to reassuring staff and volunteers.

During support meetings

Welcome and introductions

At the beginning of the meeting, the manager or team leader welcomes those present, explains the purpose, the process, and the duration of the meeting, and if needed, any rules that need to be agreed upon, such as confidentiality. If any of the participants do not know each other, some time is also given for them to introduce themselves to one another.

Supportive skills

There are specific skills that can help a manager or team leader strengthen the support they give. These include the basic PFA skills of:

recognising emotional reactions and signs and symptoms of distress (see examples of normal and more severe reactions and signs of distress on page 6).

- active listening
- calming persons in distress
- assessing needs and concerns
- helping people find solutions to their needs and problems
- helping people access information and services and other help
- activating social support systems.

Checking how team members are doing

Depending on what type of meeting is held, there are different ways of assessing how team members are doing. During individual meetings and group PFA and support meetings, the manager or team leader can ask the person(s) how they are directly and whether they are experiencing any signs or symptoms of distress. This is not appropriate, however, to do during gatherings called to show appreciation and recognition. At these types of events, the manager may give general information to the group about normal reactions to crisis events, and provide them with information about where to go for help. Team members can be approached individually during a gathering to find out how they are. If they share feelings or experiences of distress, the manager may decide to set up a more structured support meeting.

Brief factual review of action taken in the crisis situation

It is helpful to briefly review the crisis event that has led to the need for support. However, it is important that the focus is on reviewing the actions taken and not on providing detailed accounts of the event itself or people's emotional reactions. Inviting detailed accounts of the event carries the risk of heightening feelings of distress and difficult emotional reactions. Focus should both be on what happened and especially on what went well. Discussing what happened and getting a clearer understanding of the sequence of events can give a sense of relief, control, perspective and comprehension of the event. Discussing what went well can be empowering for the team members as they realise they performed well, even when under pressure. The manager should summarise the positive aspects demonstrated during the event and link this to positive projections about future events.

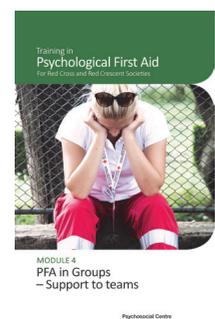
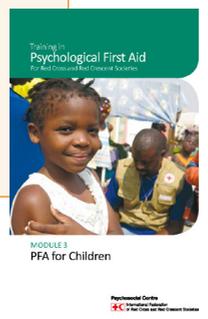
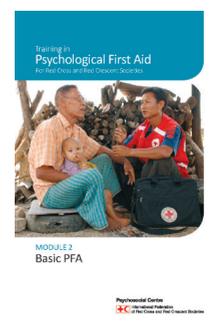
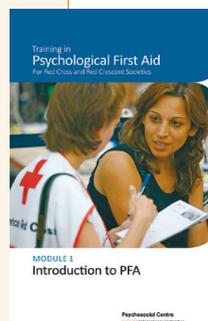
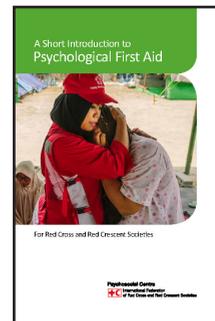
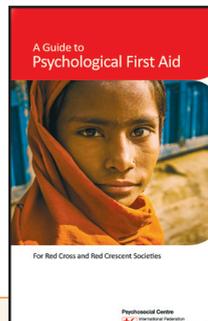
Learn more

- *A Guide to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*
- *A Short Introduction to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*

Training in Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies:

- *Module 1. An introduction to PFA (4 to 5 hours)*
- *Module 2. Basic PFA (8 to 9 hours)*
- *Module 3. PFA for Children (8 to 9 hours)*
- *Module 4: PFA in Groups – Support to teams (21 hours – three days)*

Download on www.pscentre.org



Confidentiality

It is important to keep information that is shared private. In a group setting it is important that all team members agree to this at the beginning of the meeting. Everyone should be advised not to share personal things in the meeting that they may feel uncomfortable about others knowing afterwards.

No pressure to talk

It is important that there is no pressure to talk and to respect people's wishes if they choose not to share. If someone is not ready to talk, they may still experience and appreciate the presence of a supportive fellow human being with a caring attitude. A person who does not talk during a meeting is not necessarily disengaged and will probably still gain some learning and insight from the meeting. It is vital never to press for details, ask about the worst things experienced or to probe into unpleasant thoughts or feelings, as this may distort or even damage the natural healing process.

Active listening

During support meetings, the manager or team leader listens carefully using active listening and supportive communication skills. Listening with respectful empathy and a non-judgemental attitude requires the full attention of the manager. This listening attitude conveys interest and respect and will enable a positive dialogue in the group. Besides listening attentively during the meeting, it may also be necessary to ensure that group members listen respectfully to each other and allow for others to speak.

Additional skills needed for PFA in groups:

- inclusive group facilitation: communicating and facilitating the support meeting so everyone feels included
- providing PFA to individuals and support to the team at the same time
- managing time and involving other participants when relevant
- managing group dynamics and interactions
- drawing on the strengths and resources of the group to promote social cohesion and connectedness
- encouraging and enabling peer support
- handling different and/or difficult emotions shared by participants
- providing psycho-education in a group setting.

Handling difficult reactions and/or disclosures

Any type of support meeting is an opportunity for the manager to gauge how team members are doing. If someone has strong emotional reactions related to the event and becomes either agitated or withdrawn, the manager should ask them to focus on the present, by bringing their attention back to the here and now. Ask direct questions about what they see, hear or feel in the present moment. This is an important technique to control and calm oneself and will help in dealing with possible flashbacks of past events or a tendency to dwell on memories of past crisis events. If someone starts to cry uncontrollably, if appropriate, comfort them, for example by putting a hand on their shoulder or holding their hand. Invite them to share what is making them so upset, and give the person individual PFA for some time. Allow expressions of grief, and

use this as an opportunity for psycho-education and to invite others to share ideas on positive coping methods.

If someone discloses very sensitive issues, such as insecurities about their competencies or qualifications, personal emotional problems, negative feelings towards others, or experiences of staff harassment, there are different options for response, depending on the context. In a group setting, it is important not to let the person become more vulnerable as this may feel unsafe and be uncomfortable for the others. In the interests of the affected person the best option may therefore be to acknowledge what has been said, stop the speaker, and ask him or her to discuss the situation after the group meeting in an individual support meeting. If someone discloses a situation of harassment or violence during an individual support meeting, it is important to acknowledge the situation and listen supportively, ensure the safety of the affected person and refer for further support.

Information and psycho-education

Information sharing is an important part of any support meeting during or after crisis events. When emotions have run high, it can be difficult to take in concrete information, so it is very important to repeat information and ensure it is understood. Having access to accurate information promotes safety, supports healthy coping, and stabilises emotional reactions, as information may put an end to speculation and worries. Information sharing is essential for staff and volunteers to feel safe, because they know what happened, who was affected, and how a situation ended.

An important part of providing support is also in helping staff and volunteers to understand normal reactions to abnormal events, and to recognize what kinds of reactions may need referral to professional help. The team leader can prepare psycho-educational information to share with participants in advance, if they know what kinds of reactions staff and volunteers have been having, or could be expected to have. If the crisis event, for example, involved witnessing many deaths, psycho-educational materials on reactions to grief could be included, along with other topics. Other useful topics for psycho-education include 'how to cope when in shock and crisis', 'normal reactions and how long they may last', 'how to manage stress', and 'signs and symptoms of burnout'. It may be helpful for team members to take the psycho-educational materials with them to share with friends and family who may also be affected by the crisis. The IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support provides psycho-education information on a range of topics. See the website: www.pscentre.org.

Promoting self-care, peer support and positive coping

A key component of all types of support meetings is to promote self-care, peer support and positive coping. In individual meetings the manager can ask the person what they are currently doing to look after themselves and encourage social support through activities with friends, colleagues or family. It can help to talk to someone they trust about how they are feeling. In groups the team leader can enable participants to share their ideas about self-care and positive coping with the others, and if appropriate, encourage them to keep in touch regularly to support each other after the meeting.

Peers are a vital source of support during and after crisis events, as they may have similar challenges and understand what the affected person(s) are experiencing and

feeling. Promoting peer support is helpful during a support meeting but also after the support meeting. The aftermath of a stressful event may be an opportunity for strengthening peer support amongst groups of staff and volunteers.

Ending a meeting

Closing a meeting in a good way is as important as opening the meeting with relevant information and introductions. Just before closing a meeting, it is a good idea for the manager or team leader to summarise what has been discussed, and to recap on any decisions or plans made for further support or future meetings. To end the meeting the manager or team leader should thank the participants and check that everyone is feeling okay and comfortable about ending the meeting. If needed, closing remarks can also include reminders about obligations relating to confidentiality, and information on where additional and other support can be accessed. If another meeting is needed, the manager gives information on when and where that meeting will take place.

Referrals

If someone needs to be linked or referred for further support because the help required is beyond the capacity of the National Society, a referral can be made to different service providers if available. If not, measures should be taken to set up a system in collaboration with other providers. Other services may include those providing medical help, social support, family tracing, child protection services, support to survivors of sexual- and gender-based violence, financial support, or legal advice and last but not least, mental health and psychosocial support. Examples of situations where one would refer a person for specialised psychological help are when the person:

- has not been able to sleep for the past week and is confused and disorientated
- is so distressed that they are unable to function normally and care for themselves or their children by, for example, not eating or taking care of personal hygiene despite food and washrooms being available
- loses control over their behaviour and behaves in an unpredictable or destructive manner
- threatens harm to themselves or others
- starts excessive and out-of-the-ordinary use of drugs or alcohol.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support has developed guidelines and a referral sheet for documenting referrals as well as follow-up. These resources can be used and adapted as required. The IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Psychosocial Support Toolbox also has a template for identifying referral resources and for identifying the basic steps in making a successful referral, including how to follow up on the referral.

After meetings

Reflection

After support meetings, it is useful for the team leader or manager to reflect on the process, content and outcomes of the meeting. This reflection is important for any needed follow-up and plans to provide more support, and helps to improve the quality of the staff and volunteer care. The manager can reflect on what went well and what could be improved next time. If the meeting was facilitated with a colleague, there is the option of undertaking this reflection with the colleague to receive feedback from him or her on what went well or could be improved for another time.

Follow-up

Participants in support meetings will sometimes agree on certain actions to be taken, and it is important to decide who will be responsible for following up on commitments made during the meeting. If a manager makes any promises or commitments, these must be honoured.