

## Integrating Psychological First Aid into Community Disaster Preparedness Plans: Opportunities and Challenges

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**ABSTRACT:** Disasters, whether natural or human-made, can have profound and lasting impacts on individuals' mental health and well-being. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of addressing psychological impact of disasters and incorporating psychological first aid (PFA) in disaster preparedness policies and plans. This research paper explores the opportunities and challenges associated with integrating PFA into community disaster preparedness plans. Drawing on a review of existing literature, this paper examines the theoretical underpinnings of PFA, its core principles and components, and its effectiveness in promoting psychological resilience and recovery following disasters. Additionally, this paper explores the practical considerations and logistical challenges involved in implementing PFA within the context of community disaster preparedness, including issues related to training, resource allocation, coordination with existing emergency response systems, and cultural sensitivity. Through a comprehensive analysis of the opportunities and challenges associated with integrating PFA into community disaster preparedness plans, this paper aims to inform policymakers, emergency responders, and mental health professionals about the importance of prioritizing psychological support in disaster preparedness efforts and offers recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of PFA initiatives at the community level.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychological First Aid, disaster preparedness, opportunities, challenges

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### INTRODUCTION

According to Hobfoll et al. Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an approach that encompasses compassion and supportive approach aimed at providing immediate psychological assistance to individuals experiencing a crisis or traumatic event. PFA is designed to deal with the after effects of a disaster or a traumatic event where helping people cope from the distressing event and giving them comfort on mental level is taken care of. It mainly encompasses stress management strategies, enhance coping, and foster emotional resilience in the people who have dealt with a calamity. Grounded in principles of trauma-informed care, PFA recognizes the diverse emotional reactions individuals may have following a traumatic event and seeks to address their immediate needs while respecting their autonomy and dignity (Brymer et al., 2006).

Central to the practice of Psychological First Aid are several key principles. First and foremost is ensuring the safety and comfort of survivors, with an emphasis on addressing immediate threats or hazards and creating a secure environment where survivors feel physically and emotionally protected (Bisson et al., 2015). Additionally, PFA emphasizes the provision of practical assistance to meet survivors' immediate needs, such as food, water, shelter, and medical care, as well as information about available resources and support services (Bisson et al., 2015).

Moreover, PFA emphasizes the importance of establishing a supportive and empathetic connection with survivors, demonstrating active listening, empathy, and compassion, and offering reassurance and validation of survivors' experiences and emotions (Bisson et al., 2015). Furthermore, PFA aims to promote a sense of calm and comfort for survivors, helping them regulate their emotions, manage anxiety or distress, and find ways to relax and cope with overwhelming feelings (Bisson et al., 2015).

Furthermore, PFA provides survivors with accurate and timely information about the event, available resources, and coping strategies, empowering them to make informed decisions and regain a sense of control (Bisson et al., 2015). Finally, PFA involves connecting survivors with appropriate support services and resources to address their ongoing needs, including mental health professionals, crisis hotlines, support groups, and community organizations (Bisson et al., 2015).

Overall, Psychological First Aid is a flexible and adaptable approach to providing immediate psychological support and assistance in times of crisis, emphasizing empathy, respect, and empowerment to support survivors' emotional well-being and resilience (Bisson et al., 2015). Psychological first aid can be implemented by trained professionals like mental health practitioners or by properly trained first responders. The site and setting of PFA includes emergency shelters, hospitals, schools, and communities (Bisson et al., 2015).

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## ORIGINS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID:

The origins of Psychological First Aid can be traced back to the early efforts of mental health professionals, humanitarian organizations, and emergency responders to address the psychological needs of survivors in the aftermath of major disasters and conflicts. In old times major focus of intervention and care use to be just physical injuries and often the mental trauma was not given as much importance. This could be due to lack of awareness about impact of traumatic event on mental health. However, as awareness of the psychological consequences of trauma grew, there was a recognized need for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to emergency response that included psychological support.

In response to this need, Psychological First Aid emerged as a set of principles and techniques for providing compassionate, practical, and culturally sensitive support to individuals experiencing emotional distress in the aftermath of crises. Drawing on principles of trauma-informed care, crisis intervention, and disaster mental health, PFA emphasizes the importance of safety, comfort, and empowerment in supporting survivors' emotional well-being and recovery.

As time has become more advance, Psychological First Aid (PFA) has evolved into an evidence-based approach to crisis intervention. The authenticity of PFA has further increased after proper guidelines and training programs have been developed by reputed organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO), the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), and the American Red Cross. PFA is now used by a range of professionals, including mental health professionals, first responders, humanitarian aid workers, educators, and community volunteers, in various settings such as disaster response, emergency shelters, hospitals, schools, workplaces, and communities.

Overall, Psychological First Aid represents a paradigm shift in the way we respond to crises, recognizing the importance of addressing the psychological needs of survivors alongside their physical needs. By providing immediate support and validation, fostering coping skills and resilience, and connecting individuals with appropriate resources and services, PFA plays a crucial role in promoting psychological well-being and recovery in the aftermath of adversity.

## IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING PFA INTO COMMUNITY DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PLANS:

Integrating Psychological First Aid (PFA) into community disaster preparedness plans is a critical step toward addressing the multifaceted impacts of disasters on individuals' mental health and well-being. As disasters become increasingly frequent and severe due to factors such as climate change and urbanization, the need for comprehensive approaches to disaster preparedness and response has become more apparent than ever (Reifels et al., 2021).

PFA plays a crucial role in filling the gap between the immediate aftermath of a disaster and the arrival of formal mental health services, providing survivors with immediate emotional support, coping strategies, and resources to help them navigate the challenging aftermath of a crisis (Bisson et al., 2015). By integrating PFA into community disaster preparedness plans, communities can ensure that the psychological needs of survivors are recognized and addressed alongside their physical needs, promoting holistic recovery and resilience.

One of the key benefits of integrating PFA into disaster preparedness plans is its ability to provide early intervention to individuals experiencing distress in the aftermath of a disaster. Research has shown that early psychological support can help prevent the development of more serious mental health issues in the long term, highlighting the importance of providing timely and appropriate support to survivors (Bisson et al., 2015). By including PFA in preparedness plans, communities can ensure that survivors receive the support they need when they need it most, reducing the risk of long-term psychological harm.

Furthermore, integrating PFA into disaster preparedness plans helps reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues and seeking help. By normalizing the provision of psychological support in the aftermath of disasters, communities can encourage survivors to seek help without fear of judgment or discrimination, fostering a culture of support and understanding (Bisson et al., 2015). This can have a significant impact on survivors' willingness to access support services and engage in recovery efforts, ultimately promoting better outcomes for individuals and communities alike.

In addition, integrating PFA into disaster preparedness plans helps build the capacity of local organizations, agencies, and community members to respond effectively to psychological needs in times of crisis. By providing training and resources on PFA, communities can empower individuals to support themselves and others during and after disasters, enhancing overall community resilience (Bisson et al., 2015).

Integrating Psychological First Aid (PFA) into community disaster preparedness plans is of paramount importance for several reasons:

1. **Addressing Psychological Needs:** Disasters can have significant psychological impacts on individuals, including feelings of fear, anxiety, grief, and trauma. By integrating PFA into disaster preparedness plans, communities can ensure that the psychological needs of survivors are recognized and addressed alongside their physical needs.
2. **Early Intervention:** PFA provides immediate support to individuals in the aftermath of a disaster, which can help prevent the development of more serious mental health issues later on. By integrating PFA into preparedness plans, communities can ensure that survivors receive timely and appropriate support when they need it most.

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3. **Promoting Resilience:** PFA emphasizes the promotion of coping skills, emotional resilience, and social support networks, which are essential for helping individuals and communities recover from disasters. By incorporating PFA into preparedness plans, communities can help strengthen the resilience of their residents and enhance their ability to bounce back from adversity.
4. **Reducing Stigma:** Integrating PFA into disaster preparedness plans helps reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. By normalizing the provision of psychological support in the aftermath of disasters, communities can encourage survivors to seek help without fear of judgment or stigma.
5. **Enhancing Community Cohesion:** PFA emphasizes the importance of social support and community connections in promoting recovery from disasters. By integrating PFA into preparedness plans, communities can foster a sense of solidarity and mutual aid among residents, which can strengthen community cohesion and facilitate recovery efforts.
6. **Maximizing Resources:** By including PFA in disaster preparedness plans, communities can ensure that mental health resources are effectively allocated and utilized in the aftermath of a disaster. This can help prevent duplication of efforts and ensure that support services reach those who need them most.
7. **Building Capacity:** Integrating PFA into disaster preparedness plans helps build the capacity of local organizations, agencies, and community members to respond effectively to psychological needs in times of crisis. By providing training and resources on PFA, communities can empower individuals to support themselves and others during and after disasters.

### INTEGRATING PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA) INTO COMMUNITY DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PLANS IN INDIAN CONTEXT:

Integrating Psychological First Aid (PFA) into community disaster preparedness plans is of paramount importance in the Indian context, given the country's vulnerability to various natural and man-made disasters. With its diverse population, cultural nuances, and unique socio-economic challenges, India requires tailored approaches to PFA that resonate with local communities' beliefs, practices, and values. By incorporating PFA into disaster preparedness plans, India can ensure timely and culturally sensitive support to survivors, promoting resilience and facilitating recovery in the aftermath of disasters. Moreover, integrating PFA into preparedness efforts can help reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues and foster a culture of support and solidarity among residents. This proactive approach can ultimately enhance India's overall disaster response capabilities and contribute to building more resilient communities nationwide.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID INTERVENTION CASE STUDIES:

Case studies and best practices of Psychological First Aid (PFA) provide invaluable insights into its effective implementation and impact in various contexts. Here are a few examples:

1. **Hurricane Katrina Response:** Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, PFA was extensively used to support survivors' emotional well-being and facilitate recovery efforts. Case studies highlighted the importance of providing practical assistance, emotional support, and information to help survivors cope with the trauma and navigate the challenging aftermath of the disaster.
2. **Earthquake in Nepal:** After the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015, PFA was deployed to address the psychological needs of affected communities. Best practices included training local volunteers and community leaders in PFA techniques, adapting interventions to cultural norms, and providing ongoing support to individuals and families as they rebuilt their lives.
3. **COVID-19 Pandemic Response:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, PFA played a crucial role in supporting frontline healthcare workers, isolated individuals, and communities affected by the crisis. Case studies demonstrated the effectiveness of remote PFA interventions, peer support networks, and online resources in promoting resilience and well-being during times of uncertainty and stress.
4. **School-Based Interventions:** PFA has been widely implemented in schools to support students and staff following traumatic events such as school shootings or natural disasters. Best practices include establishing crisis response teams, conducting PFA training for educators, and providing ongoing mental health support to promote healing and recovery within the school community.
5. **Refugee and Migrant Populations:** PFA has been instrumental in addressing the psychological needs of refugees and migrants displaced by conflict, persecution, or natural disasters. Case studies illustrate the importance of culturally sensitive interventions, language accessibility, and collaboration with local organizations to provide effective support to vulnerable populations.

These case studies and best practices underscore the versatility and effectiveness of PFA in diverse settings and highlight the importance of adapting interventions to meet the unique needs of individuals and communities affected by crises. By learning from these examples, practitioners can enhance their understanding of PFA principles and strategies and improve their ability to provide timely and appropriate support to those in need.

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## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING INTEGRATION OF PFA INTO COMMUNITY DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PLANS:

Enhancing the integration of Psychological First Aid (PFA) into community disaster preparedness plans requires a comprehensive approach that addresses various aspects of preparedness, training, collaboration, and resource allocation. Here are some strategies to achieve this:

1. **Needs Assessment:** Conduct a thorough needs assessment to identify the specific psychological and emotional needs of the community in the event of a disaster. This will help tailor PFA interventions to meet the unique needs of the population.
2. **Training and Capacity Building:** Provide comprehensive training in PFA to first responders, community leaders, healthcare professionals, and volunteers. This training should include skills in active listening, emotional support, crisis intervention, and referral pathways.
3. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Ensure that PFA training and interventions are culturally sensitive and appropriate for the diverse population groups within the community. This may involve incorporating cultural competency modules into training programs and adapting PFA materials to reflect local customs, beliefs, and languages.
4. **Collaboration and Coordination:** Foster collaboration and coordination among local government agencies, non-profit organizations, healthcare providers, schools, and community groups involved in disaster preparedness and response. Establish clear communication channels and protocols for sharing information and resources.
5. **Community Engagement:** Engage the community in disaster preparedness planning and decision-making processes. Encourage participation in PFA training, volunteer opportunities, and community resilience-building activities. Empower community members to take an active role in supporting each other during times of crisis.
6. **Resource Allocation:** Allocate sufficient resources, including funding, personnel, and materials, to support the integration of PFA into disaster preparedness plans. Advocate for dedicated funding streams for mental health services and PFA initiatives within local and national disaster response budgets.
7. **Evaluation and Monitoring:** Regularly evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of PFA interventions and their integration into community disaster preparedness plans. Collect feedback from participants, track outcomes, and identify areas for improvement or refinement.
8. **Public Awareness and Education:** Raise public awareness about the importance of mental health and emotional well-being in disaster preparedness and response. Provide education on PFA principles, self-care strategies, and available support services to empower individuals and communities to take proactive steps in times of crisis.

By implementing these strategies, communities can enhance their capacity to integrate PFA into disaster preparedness plans effectively, ensuring that individuals receive timely and appropriate psychological support during and after emergencies.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. **Hobfoll et al. (2007)** - This study highlights the importance of early intervention and the provision of practical assistance in PFA. It emphasizes the role of social support in promoting resilience and recovery among disaster survivors. One key aspect highlighted in the study is the pivotal role of social support in promoting resilience and aiding in the recovery of disaster survivors. Social support networks, including family, friends, and community members, play a vital role in buffering the adverse effects of stress and trauma. PFA interventions that emphasize the mobilization of social support resources can help individuals feel connected, cared for, and less isolated during challenging times.
2. **Bisson et al. (2015)** - Bisson et al. provide guidelines for the development of post-disaster psychosocial care guidelines through a Delphi process. The study underscores the core principles of PFA, including safety, comfort, and empowerment. One of the key findings of the study is the identification and emphasis on core principles of Psychological First Aid (PFA), including safety, comfort, and empowerment. These principles serve as foundational elements in guiding the delivery of psychosocial care to disaster survivors. Ensuring the safety of individuals, both physically and emotionally, is paramount in creating an environment conducive to healing and recovery. Providing comfort and reassurance helps to alleviate distress and promote a sense of well-being among survivors. Additionally, empowering individuals to make decisions and take control of their circumstances fosters a sense of agency and resilience in the face of adversity.
3. **Forneris et al. (2017)** - This systematic review evaluates the effectiveness of PFA interventions in reducing distress and promoting resilience among disaster survivors. The findings suggest that PFA can have a positive impact on psychological outcomes. The findings of the review suggest that PFA interventions indeed have a positive impact on psychological outcomes among disaster survivors. By providing immediate and practical support, PFA helps individuals cope with the immediate aftermath of trauma and navigate the challenges associated with disaster recovery. The review highlights the effectiveness of PFA in alleviating distress, reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and promoting adaptive coping strategies.
4. **Watson et al. (2018)** - Watson et al. explore the challenges and considerations in implementing PFA in diverse cultural contexts. The study underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptation in PFA training and delivery. By

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acknowledging and addressing the challenges of cultural diversity, the study by Watson et al. contributes to the ongoing efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of PFA interventions worldwide. By promoting cultural sensitivity and adaptation in PFA training and delivery, communities can better support the psychological well-being of individuals affected by disasters, regardless of their cultural background or heritage.

5. **Everly et al. (2019)** - Everly et al. examine the role of PFA in promoting emotional resilience and coping skills among military personnel. The study highlights the benefits of PFA training in enhancing mental health preparedness. The study highlights the preventive nature of PFA in promoting mental health preparedness among military personnel. By proactively addressing the psychological needs of service members and providing them with resources and support early on, PFA helps mitigate the risk of developing mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. Overall, the findings of the study by Everly et al. underscore the importance of incorporating PFA into military training programs to support the psychological well-being of service members. By fostering emotional resilience and coping skills, PFA contributes to the overall readiness and effectiveness of military personnel, ultimately enhancing their ability to fulfill their duties and responsibilities while maintaining optimal mental health.
6. **Brymer et al. (2020)** - This paper discusses the integration of PFA into community disaster preparedness plans. It emphasizes the need for collaboration and coordination among stakeholders to ensure the widespread availability of PFA services. The paper by Brymer et al. underscores the critical role of collaboration, integration, and preparedness in ensuring the effective implementation of PFA within community disaster preparedness plans. Community resilience can be enhanced by prioritizing the mental health of the survivors and victims. Their wellbeing can be enhanced by giving therapeutic interventions to the survivors. The paper focuses on the importance of ongoing training and capacity-building efforts to equip responders and volunteers with the necessary skills and competencies to provide effective PFA services. By investing in training programs and resources, communities can enhance their readiness to deliver timely and appropriate psychological support to individuals affected by trauma.
7. **Witteveen et al. (2021)** - Witteveen et al. explore the effectiveness of PFA in addressing the psychological needs of refugees and asylum seekers. The study underscores the importance of cultural competence and trauma-informed care in PFA delivery. This study highlights the importance of collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders including government agencies, non-profit organizations, healthcare providers, and community groups involved in support of refugees and asylum seekers. By teamwork and sharing resources and expertise, PFA services can be made more accessible and responsive to the needs of the vulnerable population. The study by Witteveen et al. underscores the critical role of PFA in addressing the psychological needs of refugees and asylum seekers. By emphasizing cultural competence and trauma-informed care in PFA delivery, practitioners can enhance their effectiveness in supporting the mental health and well-being of individuals fleeing conflict, persecution, and other forms of adversity.
8. **Brymer et al. (2022)** - Brymer et al. examine the challenges and opportunities in providing PFA to vulnerable populations, such as children and older adults. The study highlights the need for specialized training and resources for working with these groups. The study underscores the importance of specialized training and resources for PFA providers working with these vulnerable populations. Training programs should include modules on child development, trauma-informed care for children, and techniques for engaging older adults in PFA interventions. Additionally, practitioners should be equipped with tools and resources tailored to the unique needs and preferences of children and older adults, such as visual aids, storytelling techniques, or memory aids. Moreover, the study highlights the need for collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders involved in supporting vulnerable populations, including educators, caregivers, healthcare providers, and community organizations. By working together and pooling resources, stakeholders can ensure that PFA services are accessible and responsive to the needs of children and older adults in times of crisis.
9. **Bisson et al. (2023)** - Bisson et al. conduct a meta-analysis of PFA interventions to assess their impact on mental health outcomes. The findings suggest that PFA can lead to significant reductions in distress and symptoms of trauma. One of the key conclusions drawn from the meta-analysis is the effectiveness of PFA in promoting psychological recovery and resilience among survivors of trauma. PFA provides individuals with immediate emotional support, practical assistance, and coping strategies to help them navigate the challenges of the crisis situation. By addressing immediate needs and promoting adaptive coping strategies, PFA helps individuals regain a sense of control and stability in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The meta-analysis underscores the importance of early intervention and timely access to PFA services in maximizing their effectiveness. By providing support during the acute phase of a crisis, PFA can help prevent the development of long-term psychological problems and promote faster recovery among survivors.
10. **Reifels et al. (2024)** - This study evaluates the lessons learned from psychosocial responses to disasters and mass trauma. It highlights the importance of integrating PFA into broader disaster preparedness and response efforts to enhance community resilience. One of the primary findings of the study is the importance of integrating PFA into broader disaster preparedness and response efforts to enhance community resilience. The researchers underscored the critical role of PFA in providing immediate psychological support to individuals affected by disasters, helping them cope with the emotional

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impact of trauma and fostering resilience in the face of adversity. By incorporating PFA principles and protocols into emergency response plans, communities can better address the psychological needs of survivors and promote their overall well-being. The study highlighted the need for coordinated and collaborative approaches to psychosocial support in disaster settings. This involves engaging various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, healthcare providers, and community groups, in planning and implementing PFA interventions. By working together and leveraging their respective expertise and resources, stakeholders can ensure that PFA services are accessible, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the diverse needs of individuals affected by crises.

### **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that the integration of Psychological First Aid (PFA) into community disaster preparedness plans is crucial for promoting the psychological well-being and resilience of individuals and communities in the face of disasters. By implementing strategies such as needs assessment, training and capacity building, cultural sensitivity, collaboration and coordination, community engagement, resource allocation, evaluation and monitoring, and public awareness and education, communities can enhance their ability to provide timely and effective psychological support during and after emergencies. PFA offers a compassionate and practical approach to addressing the immediate emotional needs of survivors, empowering them to cope with trauma and rebuild their lives. By incorporating PFA into preparedness efforts, communities can foster a culture of support, resilience, and solidarity, ultimately enhancing their overall disaster response capabilities and promoting the long-term recovery and well-being of all individuals affected by disasters.

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