

**PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID: WHAT, HOW AND WHEN**  
[TRANSLATED FROM] **PRIMEROS AUXILIOS PSICOLÓGICOS: QUÉ, CÓMO Y CUÁNDO**

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Most of us have some idea of basic first aid because we receive on the job training, thanks to some interest or what we've seen on television. However, **did you know there is also psychological first aid?**

Psychological first aid is based on the idea that, in a crisis situation, people need to also address their own emotions and those of others to survive, recover and heal. Given the rampant violence in the country, the effects of trauma are among the most debilitating and perhaps longer lasting ailments that can afflict a human being. **The aftermath of emotional trauma, without proper care and attention, can last a lifetime;** even long after the physical wounds, if any, have healed.

So what can we do when we face potential trauma immediately after an emergency or crisis?

First, we must recognize the physical symptoms of stress of a crisis situation. What should we detect in ourselves and in others?

- Heart-Acceleration
- Shortness of breath
- Increased blood pressure
- Knot in the stomach or throat
- Temperature change in the skin, particularly on the hands, face and chest
- Increase in the speed of thought

It is important to note **that physical reactions to stress is a healthy response** and, therefore, is a good idea to learn to recognize their symptoms so they do not frighten us and that we allow them to flow without resistance. However, in some people with previous traumas, these feelings could be triggers: their sense of security could be compromised and they may experience memory gaps. In more severe cases, they will need to remember their name, age, where they are and the date.

After these first physical signs, some people may experience other symptoms such as trouble sleeping, food cravings (especially savory or sweet) or engage in addictive behaviors, such as excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs. Varied symptoms that can go, come or become habitual.

Once the physical signs are recognized, we can begin to identify psychological symptoms, as the reactions to the crisis can be very varied. Some people may go into shock and be dissociated in a while, others will feel anesthetized and unable to experience fear and pain. Here are some of the most common psychological reactions:

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID: WHAT, HOW AND WHEN

- Fear, sadness, confusion , anger and helplessness
- Anxiety
- Hypervigilance : the need to be alert
- Irritability

All these reactions are normal and will pass. Some people may try activities to calm down. Being with family and friends, for example , can be comforting and encouraging.

It is important to observe how children deal with the situation. Some will have separation anxiety and nightmares. Others will become more aggressive. These reactions are normal and will pass, if they can be comforted and feel protected.

### How the crisis becomes trauma?

**Trauma is not a psychological or emotional response : it is physiological.** So the best way to deal with it is to recognize this fact. In the same way as animals in nature, we have instinctive mechanisms that are activated when we feel threatened or endangered. We are prepared to run, to fight or even play dead when we face to a predator , lest we become prey.

These physical reactions are part of a cycle that must be closed once the danger passes . When we allow the physical energies that have built up to be discharged through our tissues and muscles, we can prevent trauma from setting in. It is the incomplete cycle of response to danger that results in trauma, because the biological reaction becomes blocked and stagnant.

Thus , **we help prevent trauma if we help our nervous system to regain its balance** . To do this, we need to understand how our body discharge this energy. Here are some alternatives :

- Shivering and / or sweating
- Hot flashes
- Stomach cramps
- Deep breaths
- Crying and / or laughing

All these are good signs: our body is discharging the energy that it no longer needs to regain its balance. The best thing we can do at that moment is to observe ourselves and others living through it and allow what is happening in the body, without judging it. **Just observe and understand that the human body has the innate ability to regain its balance if we let it react the way it should.** This is how we can resolve the crisis before the trauma sets in. We let our defenses against danger run their course. So psychological first aid is really about being aware of what's going on in our bodies.

### Exercises that help

To prevent trauma from settling in, it is very important to stay focused, stay present with what is happening. If you feel disoriented, confused, angry or in denial, you can do the following exercises:

1. Sit in a chair and feel your feet resting on the floor. Press your thighs against the seat , concentrating on the sensation of your body on the chair. Look around and identify six objects of the same color, to stay focused and present in the moment . Notice how your breathing deepens.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID: WHAT, HOW AND WHEN

2. Hit or gently squeeze different parts of your body from top to bottom , especially the limbs. This exercise allows you to feel your body as a container of your feelings and emotions at the time of the crisis.

### **When the crisis occurs**

Finally , some suggestions for dealing with the immediate effects of a disaster or traumatic event that affects whole communities or groups :

- Do not isolate yourself : seek the company and support of family and friends
- Organize and meet with like-minded groups in your community or neighborhood
- Try to ensure that your loved ones are safe as quickly as possible. Then , limit your exposure to news, turn on the TV or radio every two hours for an update , but avoid staying engaged.
- It is crucial to focus on your resources, concentrate on anything that will help you feel more calm , serene, confident and focused. Focus on all your systems support , do things to keep you busy .

### **As time passes:**

- Be active in your community as a volunteer. If you are able, donates blood .

Encourage yourself and others to talk about what happened. Not repetitively, but incorporating everyone's version of how it happened from beginning to end. The automatic and monotonous repetition tends to anchor the traumatic experience, while its repetition incorporating new elements from your own and others' versions reproduces the physiological cycle of coping with the trauma and promotes healthier integration of the situation.

- Feel your emotions and allow yourself to express them in a healthy way in the context of productive actions.

Finally, it is important to remember that there are also positive responses to trauma: those times when the crisis teaches us and strengthens us. These occasions are much more common than we think and to the extent that we keep in mind what we have developed when we have faced adversity , we can feel more secure when facing new events.