An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education
An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational Psychological Service

wellbeing in education

Guidance for Post Primary School Staff– Using Psychological First Aid

Introduction

This guide has been developed to enable you to talk, in a comforting and supportive way, with children or young people who may have experienced a traumatic event.

This guide also includes information on identifying signs of stress/distress in a young person. It will allow you to give immediate support to distressed students by using a model of Psychological First Aid (PFA) called the **Look, Listen & Link**[1] approach and signposting additional supports for students when needed. The provision of this support is already familiar to many teachers. It operates within the normal teacher-student relationship and does not require specialist skills.

It is important to remember that not all individuals will be in need of additional support. Expect resilience, but be on the lookout for those who appear to be struggling.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a useful model to draw on as a first step in addressing these young people's basic needs and therefore supporting their resilience. People cannot be resilient until they feel safe. It is important to connect people to their support systems, as young people who are connected to others recover better from distress.

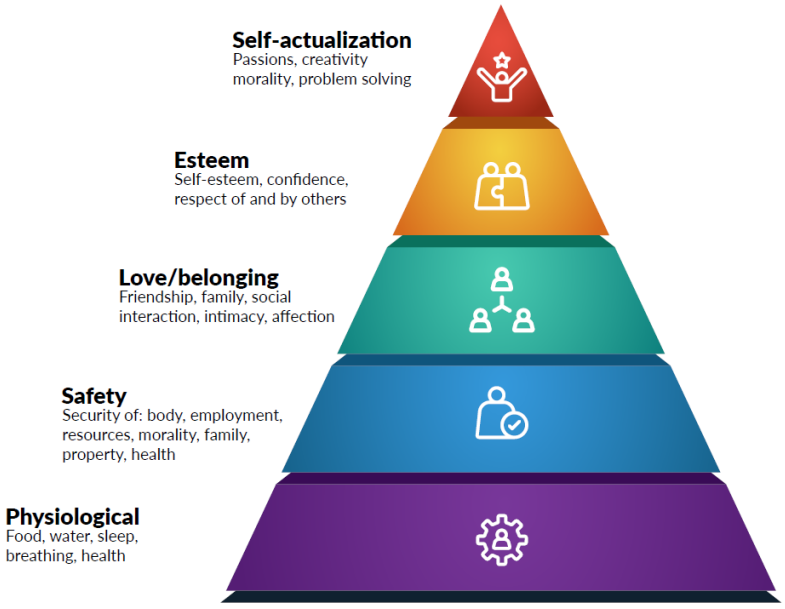


Figure. 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

[1] *Adapted by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for Irish schools from Not Reliving-But Living-Psychological First Aid for Refugee Care: Helpful Do's and Don'ts developed by the Psychological Society of Ireland (2022).*

When a young person's sense of safety is threatened, a secure and trusted relationship with key adults will help them to process and manage how they are thinking and feeling. Adults can help support young people during this time by fostering resilience and promoting recovery using the five key principles (adapted from Hobfoll et al., 2007) that were outlined by NEPS over the last number of years in supporting all members of the school community during Covid-19. These are:

- Promoting a sense of safety
- Promoting a sense of calm
- Promoting a sense of belonging and connectedness
- Promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy
- Promoting a sense of hope.

Figure. 2 Hobfoll Principles

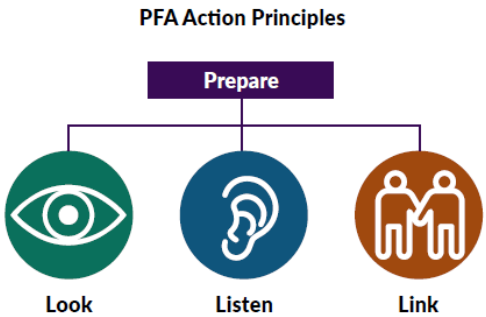
When providing support to students, it is extremely important to be mindful of your own self-care. It is therefore essential that you:

- Pace yourself
- Look after your basic needs: eat well, sleep well and remain physically active
- Recognise your own stress
- Be aware of the boundaries of your own professional competencies to the support you can offer and remember to signpost to other services if appropriate
- Maintain regular contact with your colleagues to share information and support each other. For Guidance Counsellors it is also important to maintain and access your own professional supervision.

Be mindful of your own wellbeing and how you are feeling and take steps to manage your own self-care. See supports available from the EAS service Spectrum Life here.

The LOOK, LISTEN & LINK Approach

People have an inbuilt capacity to adapt. This is what is at the heart of resilience. Stressful times can impact on student's sense of safety and they may experience a loss of power and control. As their teacher you have an opportunity to promote a sense of calm and support to your students.



During times of significant transition, changes can happen in a student's thoughts, feelings, and

behaviours. Students may have experienced loss and/or trauma, be worried and anxious about family members or have other challenges in their personal lives. Common reactions at times of stress and worry include trouble sleeping, concentrating and listening, and not finishing work. Young people may become more irritable, sad, angry, or worried. See Wellbeing support for students on gov.ie here for more information.

When a young person share their experiences, thoughts and feelings, be alert to additional risk factors. These may include:

- Challenging family circumstances
- Experience of recent bereavement
- Experience of trauma
- Pre-existing mental health difficulties
- Learning difficulties
- Additional educational needs
- Perfectionist tendencies.

It is normal for people to sometimes feel distressed when following a traumatic or stressful event. However, if a student is experiencing ongoing distress or they are struggling to function in their daily lives you may wish to consider signposting them (and their parents/guardians) to the appropriate professional services. See Appendix 1 for information on mental health and wellbeing supports.

The **LOOK, LISTEN & LINK** approach can be used when you come into contact with someone who has experienced a serious stressor. The aim of this approach is to offer immediate support and onward referral if appropriate.

The following will help you to **prepare** and be ready and able to provide this support if needed:

- Inform yourself about the situation or traumatic event (if possible)
- Have a digital copy of agencies details and psychoeducational materials that can be forwarded to the parent. See resources from Department of Education and HSE
- Decide how to share relevant information with parents (by zoom/in person).
- Identify an appropriate space/strategy for interacting with a student/parent who might be distressed. Identify somewhere that is private and discreet but in line with all public health and child protection guidelines
- Appendix 2 outlines other supports available to aid communication with a young person when English is not their first language and who might be distressed

1. **LOOK**, LISTEN & LINK

The first step is to look at their behaviour.

Look out for people with urgent basic needs. The feelings and responses people have arising from difficult experiences can vary and tend to be physical, emotional, cognitive and/or behavioural in nature. Some of the common reactions are set out below:

Look

Physical • ***Tiredness*** • ***Restlessness*** • ***Over activity*** • ***Stomach upset. headaches*** • ***Tearfulness*** • ***Nausea***	***Emotional*** • ***Withdrawn*** • ***Nightmares*** • ***Bored*** • ***Lonely*** • ***Anxious*** • ***Mood changes***
Cognitive • ***Poor concentration*** • ***Focusing on the negatives in all situations*** • ***Preoccupation with family members that are ill or in danger***	***Behavioural*** • ***Clingy with parents*** • ***May be more risk averse and scared of new experiences*** • ***Avoiding school work*** • ***Avoiding meeting peers*** • ***Hypervigilant*** • ***Panicky***
Be vigilant for a young person with serious distress reactions. Indicators of more severe reactions include: continuous distress without periods of relative calm or rest; and intense intrusive recollections that continue despite the person being in a safe place. We should watchfully wait and be aware if these symptoms continue for over one month.	

2. LOOK, **LISTEN** & LINK

Listen

Pay attention to what the young person is saying.

Acknowledge their feelings but respect their privacy, try not to interrupt or draw out details of what they have experienced that they may not want to or be ready to share.

Avoid comments such as “you should be happy you are safe”.

Talk to them about their own personal strengths and ways they have shown resilience or helped their own situation.

If the young person describes feeling “unreal”, help them to ground themselves with an exercise (e.g. ask them to “feel where your body contacts the chair”; “tap your feet on the ground”, “describe out loud what you see/hear in the room around you”, “breathe slowly, count your breaths”). Remind them to practice and use these strategies when feeling like this in future.

For further guidance on listening to a young person see also the NEPS resource Listening to Children and Young People and further information in Appendix 3, Appendix 4 and Appendix 5.

3. LOOK, LISTEN & **LINK**

Link

While some students may have experienced stressful and traumatic events, most people tend to recover well over time. Changes in the environment might also add to their feelings of confusion or being overwhelmed. We must watchfully wait, be aware and be able to link them in with specialist services where necessary.

Advise students to use the supports that they already have (e.g. family and friends).

Have information available for parents about specialist services that are available locally.

Try to “check in” regularly.

Encourage the young person to maintain as much routine as possible (e.g. activities, bedtimes, mealtimes, homework etc.).

Encourage parents to remain as supportive as possible, remind them to monitor their conversations about the traumatic event the presence of their as this may cause or add to their anxiety or stress and seek help if they continue to have concerns for their children.

See information in Appendix 1 on how to link with external agencies.

Appendix 1 - Mental Health and Wellbeing Supports

The Department of Health and the HSE have issued up-to-date information and links to supports available in a Mental Health and Wellbeing Information Leaflet here. In collaboration with the Department of Health NEPS has shared hard copies with all post primary schools.

The Family Resource Centres Network has information that will help you to find out what is on offer in your local Resource Centre.

Children and Young People's Services Committee

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) are a key structure identified by Government to plan and co-ordinate services for children and young people in every county in Ireland.

GP and health centres

A GP can offer support for anyone in crisis. Find a service:

- GP or health centre
- Out of hours GP service

Hospital emergency services

Emergency department of local general hospital.

Telephone emergency services

Contact emergency services on **999** or **112**.

Appendix 2 - Supports to Aid Communication

It is important to consider that there may be a significant language barrier between you and the person you are using the **Look, Listen, Link** approach with. You may not have access to an interpreter at the time, and this will make it more difficult to offer this approach, so we need to be creative and flexible in how we communicate.

If this is the case, we may need to consider our **nonverbal compassionate communication,** to make the person feel safe and convey an attempt to listen and understand and comfort. Helping the person feel safe and to contain their emotions is key.

- Position yourself at the young person's eye level and make appropriate eye contact. Sit close by on a chair or even on the floor together.
- Use open body language, leaning towards the young persons, arms unfolded, resting on your lap
- Have a calm face
- Engage in calm breathing, leading the young persons in co-regulation (engaging in calming activities with the young persons)
- Tilt head and nod to convey sympathy
- Quite, calm tone of voice and slow down your pace of voice
- By containing the young person's emotions it means we are sometimes just sitting with the distress, **containing it** – allowing the student to express it, as you meet that distress with a calm reassuring presence can really help. If the student feels that you are overwhelmed by their emotions it will increase their distress.

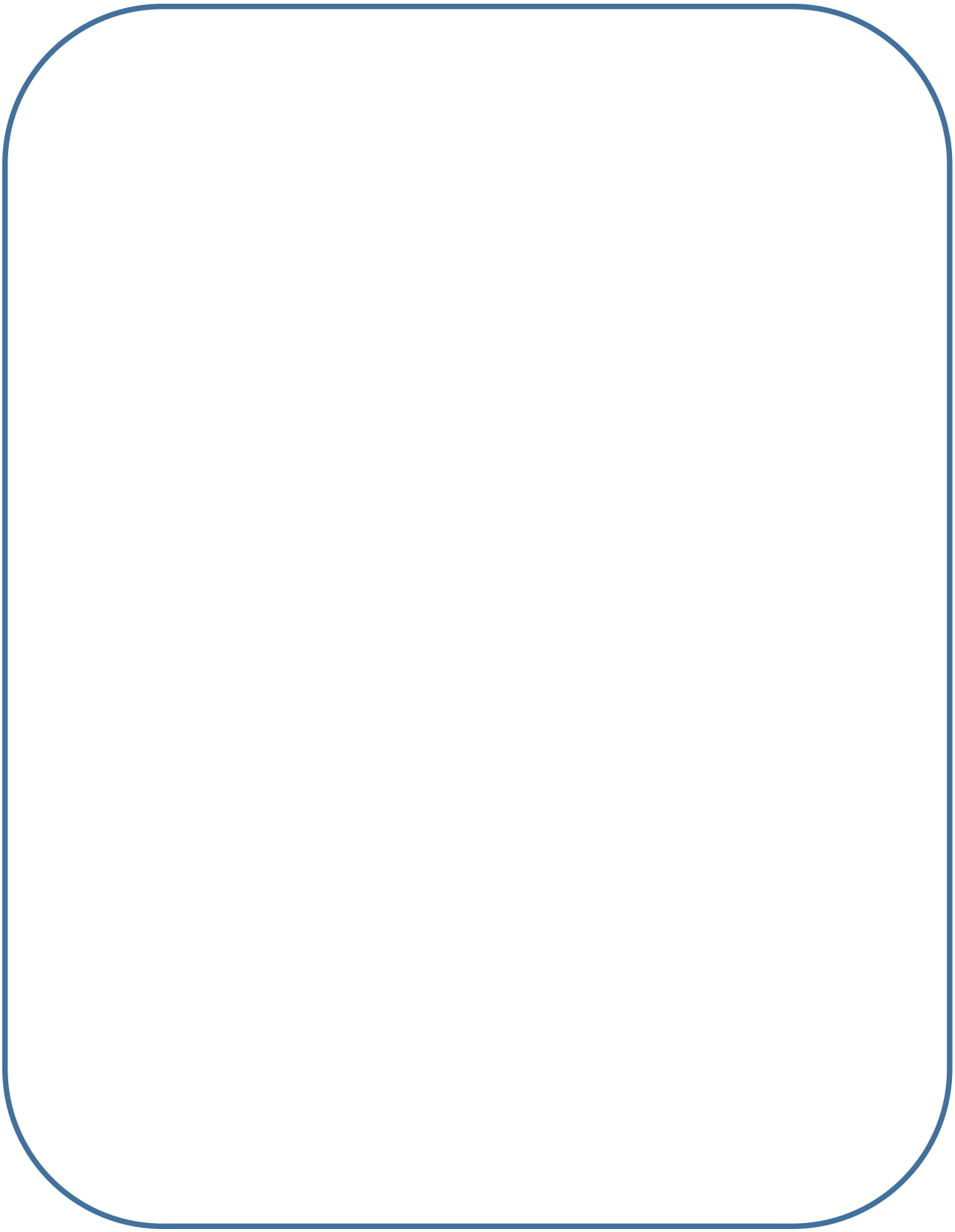
We know teachers do a lot of this already, but this confirms that you are doing the right things and it is guided by an evidence-informed approach.

- Visual communication tools can be developed to support the communication of emotions. Visuals can be really helpful and immediate. Emotions are used in the feeling card example below, as they are gender free and universally understood.
- Other information can be provided, for example asking the student to draw what is making them feel happy, sad, angry etc., if they want to. Drawing can also be a helpful tool in communication.

Feeling card

How do you feel?		
Happy	**Sad**	**Angry**
Worried	**Scared**	**Lonely**

If you want to, you can draw what is making you feel this way



Appendix 3 - Materials and Resources for Schools

For further advice on supporting children and young people, click on the links:

NEPS General Resources

NEPS Wellbeing advice and resources

These links include information on:

- Wellbeing Guidance for parents, students and schools including:
  - Managing your thoughts and feelings
  - Dealing with Anxiety
  - Coping with Fear
  - Managing Panic.
- Responding to Critical Incidents including:
  - Children's Understanding and Reaction to Death According to Age (R6)
  - Stages of Grief (R7)
  - How to Cope When Something Terrible Happens (R8)
  - Reactions to a Critical Incident (R9)
  - Ways to help your Child through this difficult time (R12)

Appendix 4 - Questions and suggestions for talking and listening to students

Key Considerations for school staff:
• How am I building and maintaining rapport? • Am I listening? • What is it like for this student at the moment? • Am I on the same page as this student? • Do I understand what his/ her concerns are? • Am I communicating that understanding to the student? • What more can I do to try to get on the same page?
Opening conversation:
• Introduce yourself if the young person is new to you. • How may I help you? • What are the most important things I can help you with? • I see/notice your body seems….. • I see/notice you are not playing in yard…. • I see/notice you are finding it hard to concentrate…. • Tell me what is worrying you…. • How can I help you?
Listening and showing empathy:
• Tell me about what is worrying you…. • I am hearing that you are worried about … • It is very normal to be sad, angry, upset, worried, frustrated…. • I hear what you are saying about…. • I fully understand why you are feeling like this… • In this situation, your reactions are normal and similar to others… • Maybe we can discuss some things we can do to help… • It is a difficult time, and I do understand it is very challenging. Let's discuss if there is anything you can do to make the situation better. • Would it be helpful to discuss things that you can do to help you manage? • The things we are doing to support you are… • I wonder if it is any help to you to know that these feelings are natural. I understand that this can feel overwhelming, so maybe we can talk about how to manage these feelings. The first step is to acknowledge the feelings, the next is what you can do to make sure that they don't take up too much time or space in your life. • It can help to have one or two times during each day that you can call your worry times, for example half an hour in the afternoon and a half an hour in the evening. If worrying thoughts occur during other times of the day and night, ask them to come back later, or say aloud that you will take care of them during your worry time. • I am concerned about you and would like to refer you to someone else who can offer you more help.
Reflective comments:
• From what you're saying, I can see how you would be … • It sounds as if you're saying …

• It seems that you are ...
Clarifying comments
• Tell me if I'm wrong, but it sounds as if you … • Am I right when I say that you …
Supportive comments:
• No wonder you feel … • It sounds really hard … I'm really sorry this is such a tough time for you. • It sounds as if you're being hard on yourself. • We can talk more tomorrow if you'd like.
Empowering comments & questions:
• What have you done in the past to help yourself feel better when things got difficult? • What do you think would help you to feel better? • I have an information sheet with some ideas about how to deal with difficult situations. Maybe there's an idea or two here that might be helpful for you. • People can be very different in what helps them feel better. When things get difficult for me, it helps if I ... Could something like that work for you?

Appendix 5

Dos and Don'ts when offering support	
Do	**Don't**
✓ Listen more than you speak to identify concerns	× Pressure a student to speak if they do not want to speak
✓ Ask gently probing questions	× Be judgmental
✓ Use open questions: when, where, what, who?	× Use technical terminology
✓ Acknowledge feelings and understanding of events	× Talk about yourself or personal issues or troubles
✓ Normalise emotions and reactions	× Give false promises or false assurances
✓ Recognise internal resources and capacity to cope	× Share someone else's story or experiences
✓ Be patient and calm	× Exploit the trust and confidentiality shared
✓ Allow processing and venting of emotions	
✓ Listen for student's options and help them make the choices.	
✓ Ensure confidentiality unless issues mentioned affect the safety of the individual or others	
✓ Ensure the **'Do no harm'** principle[1] is upheld	

[1] This states that, in considering how best to support or help another, one must weigh up potential risks or negative impacts that might arise for the other person as a result.