

# Emotional First Aid

English Version



# What is Emotional First Aid (EFA)?

**A peer-led approach to crisis response that promotes healing and avoids further traumatization**



Note: We do not use the term "Psychological First Aid" as it perpetuates the medical industrial approach to mental health and can be stigmatizing and pathologizing for survivors of trauma.

# Common signs that someone is in crisis



**Uncontrollable  
Sobbing / Shaking /  
Difficulty Breathing**



**Emotional  
Outbursts**



**Freezing /  
Holding Breath**



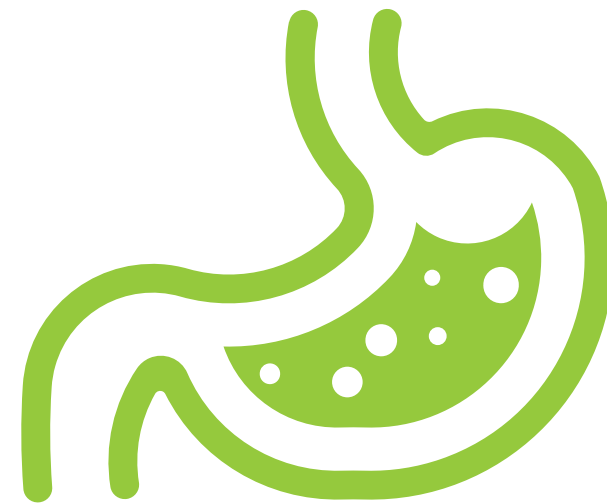
**Withdrawal**

While these are common signs, everyone is different. Some survivors may also show no signs of distress, yet may still need support.

# Our body's **Emergency Stress Response** helps us survive in times of crisis



**Heart Rate &  
Blood Pressure  
changes**



**Digestion  
shuts down**



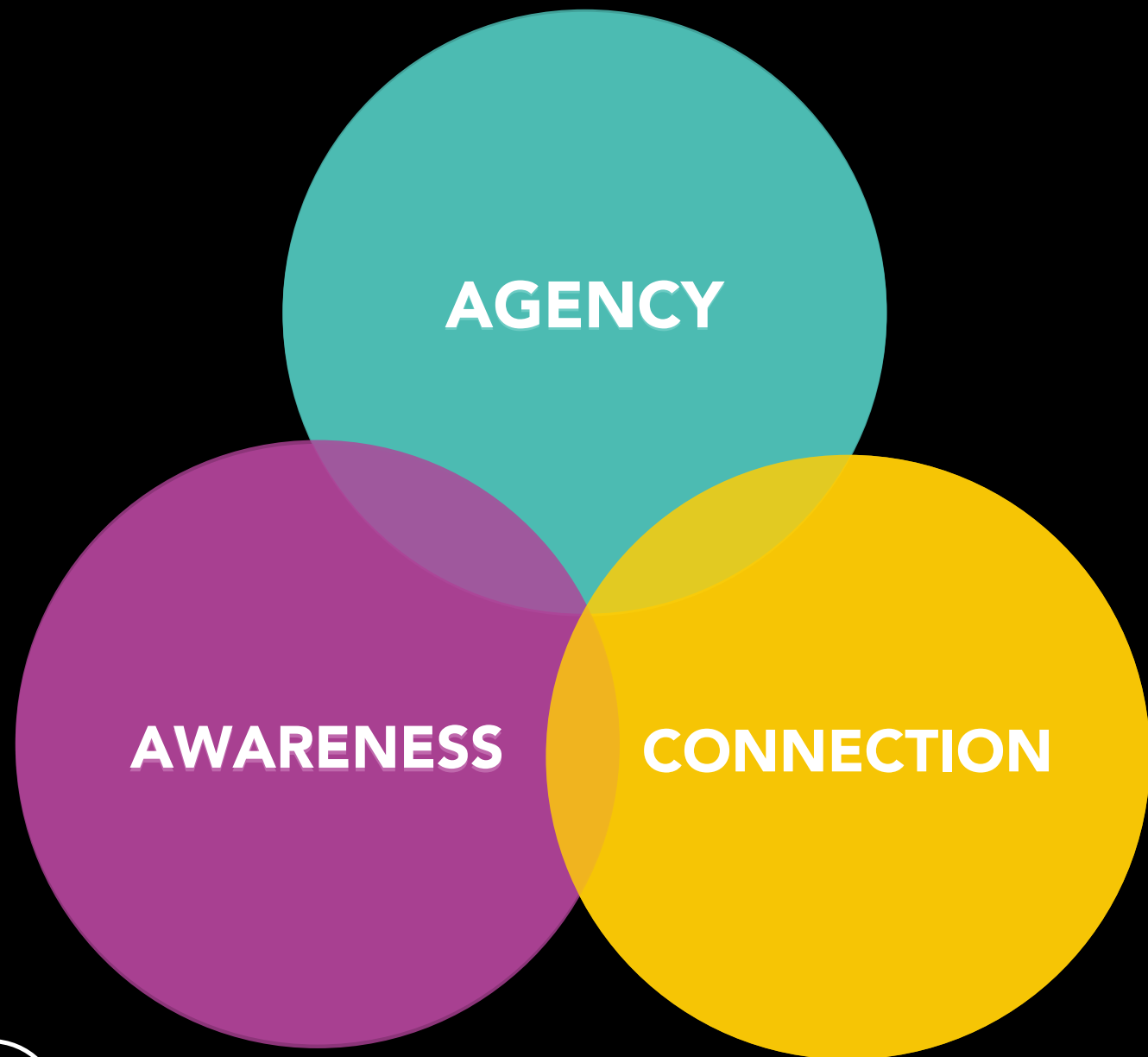
**Immune  
System  
shuts down**



**Logical  
"Thinking Brain"  
goes offline**

These are common physiological responses that can impact someone in crisis; however this list is not exhaustive nor representative of all survivors.

# EFA Principles



## **AGENCY**

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Every survivor is the expert of their own healing. Honor their innate strength, courage, wisdom, resilience, and right to identify their own needs.

## **AWARENESS**

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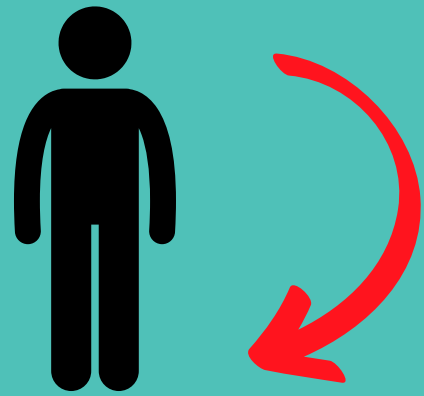
Racial, gender, religious, class, cultural, and other power dynamics can cause and exacerbate trauma. Be aware of how your own experiences may differ from someone else's. Don't make assumptions. Approach every survivor with sensitivity, humility, and care.

## **CONNECTION**

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Empathy, compassion, and human connection can support someone in crisis to feel emotionally safe, even when their environment may not be or feel safe. This positive connection can buffer against the long-term negative impacts of trauma.

# The EFA Approach



## Top Down

When our Thinking Brain is offline, we can't talk our way into feeling differently.

Talking or re-telling the story before someone is ready can cause further traumatization.



## Bottom Up

EFA returns the body to homeostasis first. This signals the Thinking Brain to come back online.

We then listen and validate the survivor and promote a sense of personal empowerment.

# EFA Steps

1



**CALM  
YOUR BODY**

2



**ESTABLISH  
SAFETY**

3



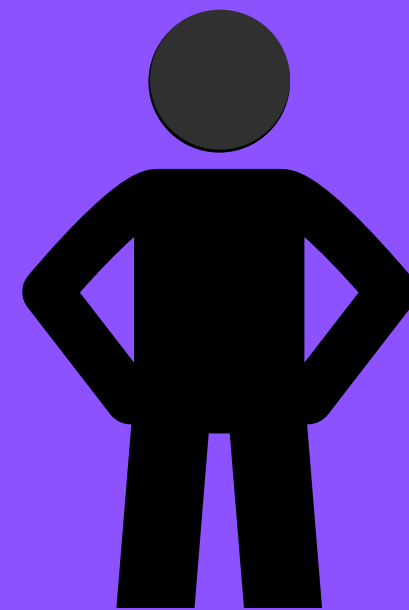
**HELP THEM CALM  
THEIR BODY**

4



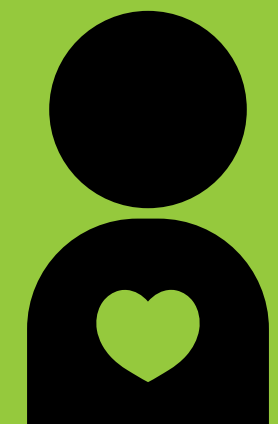
**LISTEN &  
VALIDATE**

5



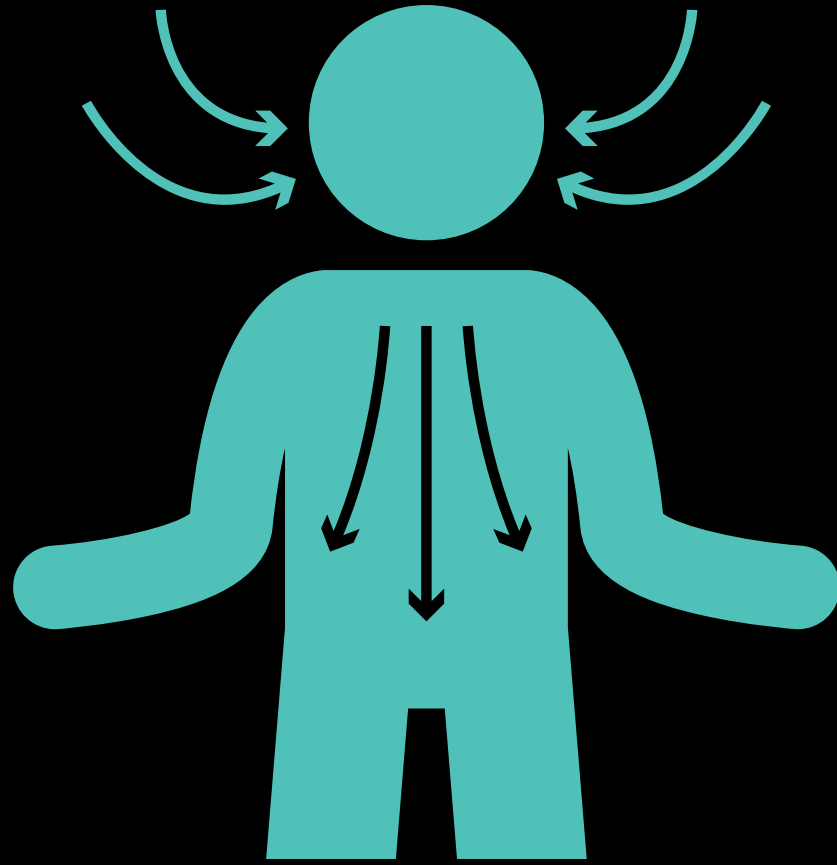
**RESTORE  
AGENCY**

6



**PRACTICE  
SELF-CARE**

1



# CALM YOUR BODY

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If you are in shock, follow the EFA steps to care for yourself.

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Panic is contagious. Trying to help others when you are in shock can do more harm than good.

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Take several deep breaths. If there's time, count to 5 on each inhale and exhale.



2



## **ESTABLISH SAFETY**

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**If possible, remove the person from physical danger. Check if the person needs immediate medical attention.**

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**Find a relatively quiet place where there is privacy. This could be near a wall or a tree.**

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**The feeling of safety is unique to each person. Support the survivor to identify what they need to feel safe and comforted.**

3



**HELP THEM  
CALM  
THEIR BODY**

The following tools may help:



**Say their name.**



**Sit beside them.**



**Reassure them, "You're not alone.  
I'm here with you."**



**Breathe together.**



**Lean against a wall or tree.**



**Walk together.**

# 3

## HELP THEM CALM THEIR BODY

### Self hug.

Can include rocking, swaying, or humming a comforting song.

### Five senses.

Engage each of the senses. E.g. Sip water or tea. Smell a plant. Eat a snack. Hold an object. Look at the sky.

### Self soothe.

Invite them to rub their hands together and create heat, then place on the body where it's needed.

### Stomp, run in place, jump, shake.

This helps release stress chemicals in the body.

### Scream.

On the count of 3, scream together. If it's safer, scream into a pillow or shirt. Or "whisper scream."

### Cry.

This can be a cathartic release. If they are sobbing uncontrollably, help them take slow, deep breaths.

4

I'm here  
with you

I hear you

# LISTEN & VALIDATE

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Reassure them that anything they share is confidential. This creates safety.

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Don't force them to talk if they aren't ready. It's okay to sit in silence.

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Invite them to share how they feel. Listen actively. Don't interrupt. Reflect back what you heard them say.

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Focus on feelings, not just on the story.

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If they get stuck in the trauma of retelling the story, let them know they don't have to share now. Slow them down. Take deep breaths together.

# 4

## HELPFUL PHRASES

**The following can help a survivor feel seen, heard, and validated:**

- I'm so sorry this happened.
- I hear you.
- That sounds really hard.
- I believe you.
- It's not your fault.
- You didn't deserve this.
- It's okay to feel sad / scared / angry / etc.
- It's okay if you don't want to talk now.
- You can talk whenever you are ready.
- Take all the time you need.
- I'm here with you.
- You are not alone.
- I admire your courage / strength / vulnerability.
- I'm so proud of you.
- Thank you for sharing. That was so brave.

# What to avoid



**TOUCHING  
WITHOUT ASKING**



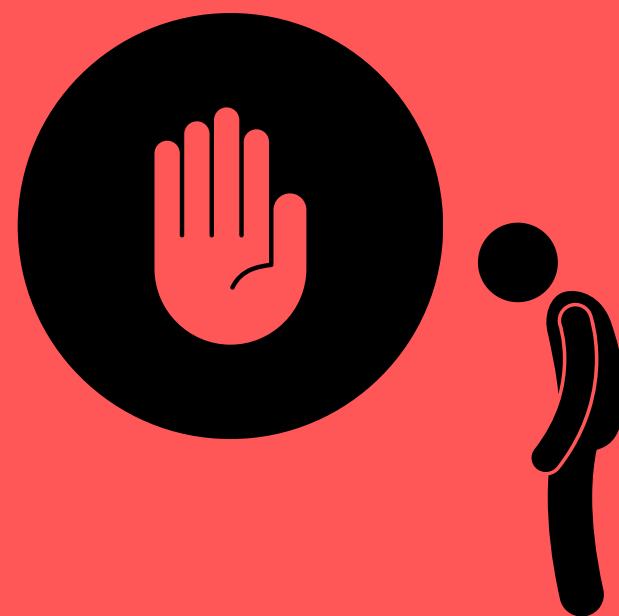
**FORCING THEM  
TO TALK**



**GIVING  
ADVICE**



**TAKING OVER  
WITH YOUR STORY**



**INVALIDATING  
THEIR PAIN**

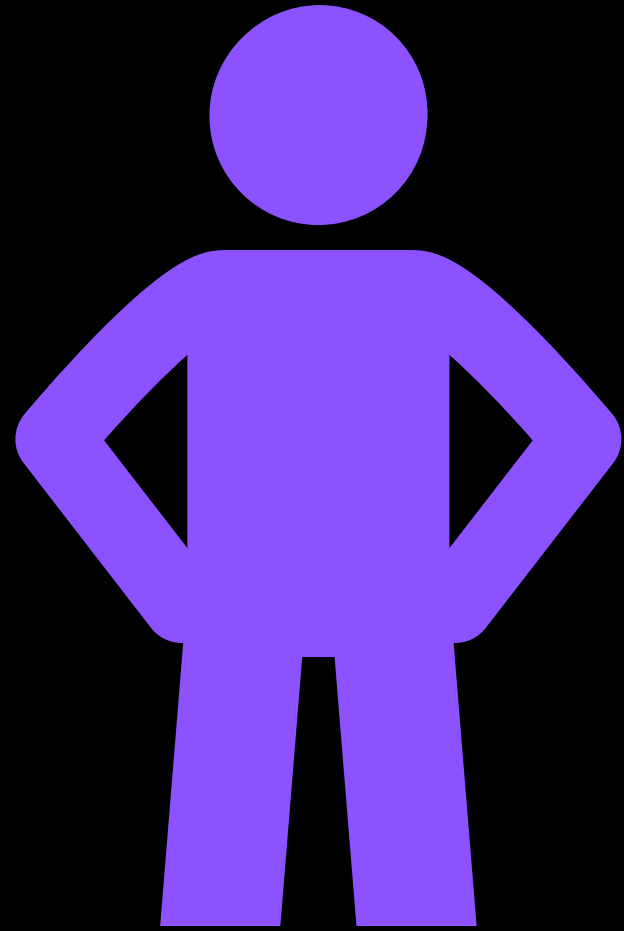
# PHRASES TO AVOID

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**The following well-intentioned statements may invalidate a survivor's pain and can lead to self judgment or shame about how they feel:**

- You'll feel better later.
- Everything will be okay.
- Everything happens for a reason.
- This will pass.
- Just be happy.
- Don't worry.
- Shhhhhh, don't cry.
- Try to forget about it.
- Don't be sad.
- Try not to feel sad / scared / etc.
- Relax.
- Just calm down
- Just let it go.
- It could be worse.
- It happened to me, and I'm okay.
- Be grateful.

5



**RESTORE  
AGENCY**

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**"How does your head / heart / body feel on a scale of 1-10?"**

This helps them bring awareness to their present state. Ask what can help shift their number?

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**"How can I support you right now?"**

Focus on immediate needs to avoid the overwhelm of thinking about the past or the future.

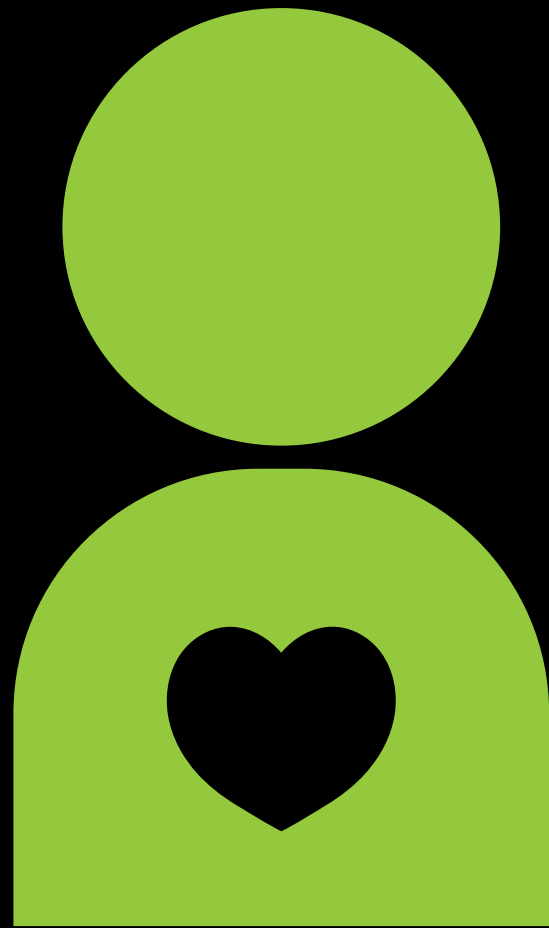
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**Offer simple choices to promote a sense of agency, power, and control.**

E.g. Do you want to sit here or there? Do you want water or tea? Do you want to talk or just sit together in silence?



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# PRACTICE SELF-CARE

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## **Caring for others can be both rewarding and draining.**

It can also lead to burnout, health issues, "vicarious trauma," and can reactivate your own trauma.

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## **"How does my head / heart / body feel on a scale of 1-10?"**

Bring awareness to how you feel. What would shift your number?

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## **Release & Renew.**

Release any stress or emotion you may be holding in your body. Stomp, shake, scream, walk, run, cry, etc.

Then do something nourishing for your body, mind, and heart. Drink water or tea, take deep breaths, eat a snack, spend time with a loved one, etc.

# Let's Connect

For more information, or if you'd like to volunteer to translate this guide into more languages, connect via email or social media:

 [WeAreHealingTogether.org](https://WeAreHealingTogether.org)

 [info@WeAreHealingTogether.org](mailto:info@WeAreHealingTogether.org)

 [@WeAreHealingTogether](https://www.facebook.com/WeAreHealingTogether)

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