

# Basic Psychosocial Support Skills

A guide for Service Providers at Points of Entry  
in Eastern and Southern Africa



# Acknowledgements

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The guide was produced with reference to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) *Basic Psychosocial Skills – A Guide for COVID-19 Responders*<sup>1</sup>, and WHO *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide*<sup>2</sup>. With sincere thanks to all those who helped develop the guide including representatives from International Organization for Migration (IOM) East Africa and the Horn of Africa, the Mental Health & Psychosocial Support Network (MHPSS.NET), Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI), Save the Children, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), and WHO.

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# Disclaimers

The case examples used in this study are inspired by true experiences from service providers at points of entry. Names, locations and descriptions of events have been altered to ensure confidentiality and prevent risks of identification.

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1 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Basic Psychosocial Skills A Guide for COVID-19 Responders, 2020 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-05/Basic%20Psychosocial%20Skills-%20A%20Guide%20for%20COVID-19%20Responders.pdf>

2 Doing what matters in times of stress: an illustrated guide. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. [www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927)

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## Acronyms

<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease
<b>ESARO</b>	Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based Violence
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IPC</b>	Infection prevention and control
<b>MHPSS</b>	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
<b>MHPSS.NET</b>	Mental Health & Psychosocial Support Network
<b>PFA</b>	Psychological First Aid
<b>PPE</b>	Personal Protective Equipment
<b>PSEA</b>	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
<b>PSS</b>	Psychosocial Support
<b>REPSSI</b>	Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative
<b>SEA</b>	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
<b>SOPs</b>	Standard Operating Procedures
<b>SRSH</b>	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization



# Definitions and terminology

## Service Providers

The term *service provider* is used in the broadest sense possible to include anyone who is working at a point of entry or providing a service in a nearby community. This includes both those who provide regular services in times of normalcy, as well as those designated as frontline workers within the COVID-19 response at a point of entry. This also includes volunteers and community workers as well as staff. Examples of service providers include, but are not limited to:

- Immigration officials;
- Security personnel (e.g. military, border police, security guard);
- Translators;
- Customs agents and staff of Port Health Authorities;
- Health care workers (e.g. doctor, nurse, ambulance driver, community health worker);
- Mental Health professionals (e.g. counsellor, clinician, psychologist, psychotherapist);
- Contact tracers;
- Lab technicians;
- Point of entry administrative staff;
- Trade and customs officers.

## Points of Entry

A *point of entry* is defined as “a passage for international entry or exit of travellers, baggage, cargo, containers, conveyances, goods and postal parcels as well as agencies and areas providing services to them on entry or exit”. There are three types of points of entry: international airports, ports and ground crossings<sup>3</sup>.

## Anyone passing through a Point of Entry

The term *anyone passing through a point of entry* includes any woman, man, girl or boy in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region who passes through a point of entry, regardless of their reason for doing so.

## Well-being

A person’s well-being can contain elements of:

- **Personal well-being:** positive thoughts and emotions such as hopefulness, calm, self-esteem and self-confidence.
- **Interpersonal well-being:** nurturing relationships, responsive caregiving, a sense of belonging, and the ability to be close to others.
- **Skills and knowledge:** the capacity to learn, make positive decisions, effectively respond to life challenges and express oneself.

## Psychosocial Support

The IASC composite term *mental health and psychosocial support* (MHPSS) is used to describe “any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorder”<sup>4</sup>. The full range of MHPSS services is illustrated in the graphic below.

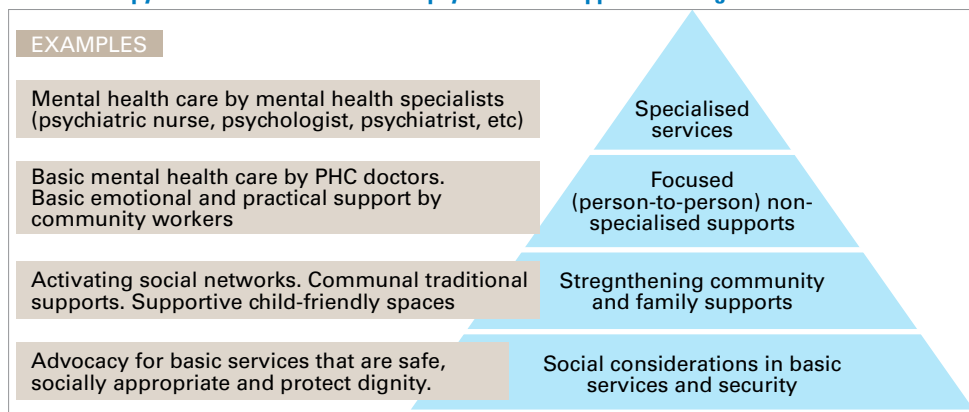
The term used in this guide is *psychosocial support* (PSS) which describes the basic helping skills that promote mental health and psychosocial well-being (the bottom two layers of the pyramid). This includes the provision of basic services by non-specialized staff and volunteers in a humane and dignified way, which promotes people’s mental health and well-being.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, International Health Regulations, 2005 [www.who.int/ihr/publications/9789241580496/en/](http://www.who.int/ihr/publications/9789241580496/en/)

<sup>4</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2007). IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. Geneva: IASC. [www.who.int/mental\\_health/emergencies/guidelines\\_iasc\\_mental\\_health\\_psychosocial\\_june\\_2007.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/guidelines_iasc_mental_health_psychosocial_june_2007.pdf)



## Intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies



Source: IASC Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Emergencies: What should Protection Programme Managers Know? 2010

Note: For an explanation of the different layers, see pages 12-13 of the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings 2007

Refugees at Oraba border post, Uganda. © UNICEF/UN031103/Bongyereinw



# SECTION 1

## Introduction

This guide has been developed to orient service providers at points of entry about the basic tenets of PSS skills and how to support the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of anyone passing through a point of entry.

The guide provides an overview of the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, and outlines:

- **Key aspects of self-care** to support the well-being of the point of entry service providers themselves;
- Key elements service providers should consider to **support the well-being of those they come into contact with** at points of entry;
- The importance of **providing information and referrals** to specialized services.



### Why is this guide important?

Working at a point of entry, you must take care of your own well-being, while also being attentive to the well-being of persons passing through a point of entry. It is thus important that you understand your own feelings and emotions, and are able to recognize situations that can be stressful and know how to handle them.



### What will I learn?

This guide will provide you with basic information about common reactions to stressful situations and a set of basic skills to support your ability to cope with your own stress. You will also be better prepared to interact calmly with people during stressful times and experiences, to de-escalate potential conflict, and know how to refer them to more specialized services, if needs be.

### Is this guide for me?

- Do you work at a point of entry during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Do you have to interact with and support people who are passing through a point of entry?
- Are you concerned about your own wellbeing?
- Is your work essential to the well-being of people affected by COVID-19?
- Or is your work contributing to the systems or services which target and benefit those who are passing through a point of entry?

***If yes, then this guide is for you!***

Temperature screening at a border crossing. Photo: © IOM Somalia



Yes, I am reading this book because I care about my family.

Yes, and I care about my well-being.





## SECTION 2

### Taking care of your own well-being

*At the end of this section you will know about the importance of self-care and some techniques and activities that you can do to support your own well-being.*



**Remember:** You are an essential part of the COVID-19 response! And self-care will help support you in your important work

#### Why looking after yourself matters

For you to effectively support the well-being of those you interact with and might have to support in a practical way, you must first look after yourself and your own well-being. Working at a point of entry during the COVID-19 response can create additional stress, so it is essential that you look after yourself.

It is stressful to work in an emergency context, and supporting the response to COVID-19 is unprecedented. **It is normal to experience a wide range of feelings and emotions**, including:

- Fear of falling ill and dying;
- Fear of being placed in quarantine because of coming into contact with a suspected or confirmed case;
- Dealing with stigma and discrimination due to the fact you are in a high-risk situation in terms of potentially coming onto contact with those with COVID-19;
- Feeling powerless in protecting loved ones;
- Feeling fearful of losing loved ones because of the virus.

**As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic it is likely that you are also facing many new demands which can cause you additional stress.**

You may have to:

- Work longer hours, without adequate resources or protection, even if not recommended.
- Deal with angry crowds of people at points of entry who become frustrated and agitated by requirements to be screened and tested for the virus, and/or because of longer-than-normal waiting times due to the procedures in place to detect suspected or positive cases.
- Adhere to strict bio-security measure which are stressful, including the wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the need for constant vigilance and awareness.
- Limit your social interactions with friends and family because of your work.
- Provide additional care and attention to your children who are at not going to school due to COVID-19, and/or your older relatives who are trying to limit their exposure by self-isolating.
- Deal with COVID-19-related stigma and discrimination because of your work.

## Case example 1: Hana, data registration officer at international airport uses her hobbies to cope with work stress

Working as an IOM Data Registration Officer at an international airport, Hana knows that she will meet many migrants every day.

The conditions experienced by migrants before return, and the pre-existing health complications for some returnees, are oftentimes dire. *"Welcoming returnees, registering and providing them with information is part of my daily routine. I hear stories of children and mothers who have gone through difficult circumstances, who have witnessed destruction, and the death of their family and friends,"* says Hana.

Hana remembers a colleague at the airport who broke down after seeing a person experiencing serious mental health problems. Working as a frontline responder to migrant returnees, Hana has witnessed

a person dying in front of her due to health complications. Hana says *"It is not easy to be at the frontline and it is very disturbing when you feel that there is little you can do. My colleagues and I try our best to assist returnees, by working closely with government and non-governmental actors."*

**In order to maintain her well-being, Hana has several ways of disconnecting from work and for coping with stress.**

*"I am very good at handicraft. I spend my spare time watching movies and doing various handicraft projects. This helps me switch off from work and the desperate stories I hear all day,"* says Hana. She also explained how she and her colleagues are great supports to one another when they come across difficult circumstances together.

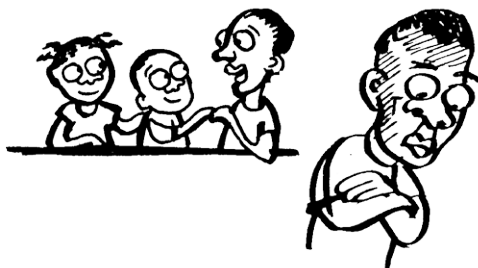
### Everyone reacts differently to stress.

People can experience physical, mental, emotional and behavioural symptoms of stress:

- **Physical:** headaches, dizziness, heart racing, chest pains, difficulty sleeping and eating, fatigue, rapid breathing, being easily startled, muscle tremors.
- **Mental:** difficulty concentrating, confusion, disorganized thinking, forgetfulness, difficulty making decisions, dreams or nightmares, intrusive thoughts.
- **Emotional:** mood swings, over-emotional, being easily irritable, emotional numbness, anger, depression/sadness, anxiety/apprehension/worry, lack of motivation.
- **Behavioural:** risk taking, over- or under-eating, hyper-alertness, apathy and listlessness, aggression, withdrawal and isolation, compulsive behaviour,

relationship problems (e.g. increased conflict), increased use of alcohol and other substances, disengaging from religious/cultural/spiritual practices.

- **Spiritual:** loss of hope, lost sense of purpose, doubt, loss of sense of connection, feelings of emptiness.





**Remember that it is normal and okay to feel stressed** – it is the body's natural reaction in times of perceived danger.

But it is equally important to remember that if **stress is affecting your daily life and stops you from doing your daily activities** (e.g. going to work or taking care of your child) **it is recommended that you seek professional support.**



Can you think of three things that you already do on a regular basis to support your own well-being?

Do any of those things match with the suggested activities below?

**The following activities are suggestions to help manage your stress on a daily basis.**

**You should only choose and practice the activities that you feel comfortable with and that could contribute to your well-being.**

These activities should support your well-being and help you cope with stress – not add additional stress. You should be kind to yourself and forgiving if you do not manage to do these things on any given day, just try again the next day.

- ☐ Keep yourself up-to-date and informed on the infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, but only seek information from reliable sources, such as WHO and national health authorities.
- ☐ Avoid following the news too often if it makes you feel distressed, and try to minimize your exposure to myths and rumours on social media.
- ☐ Establish and maintain healthy routines, such as getting enough sleep, eating well, staying re-hydrated, and disconnecting from work.
- ☐ Minimize your use of substances – including alcohol, drugs, caffeine or nicotine.
- ☐ Move your body each day, by exercising and going for walks. Remember to adhere to local physical distancing and isolation rules when exercising.

- ☐ Maintain recreational and mental activities that can help you relax and alleviate stress – for example: reading, singing, dancing, cooking, exercising, and listening to the radio.
- ☐ At the end of each day, make a short list (in your head or on paper) of your accomplishments and things you are grateful for.
- ☐ Maintain your social contacts while keeping physical distancing. Set aside time each day to speak with your family and friends, and balance this with needed time alone to rest and restore if you can.
- ☐ Rely on your values and spiritual beliefs as positive coping strategies and to find motivation.
- ☐ If you feel overburdened, stressed or overwhelmed because of an increased workload or additional responsibilities at home, try to think of what you and others can do differently to reduce some of the burdens. Speak about your concerns and discuss your suggested actions with family members, supervisors and colleagues.

**If you want to try a muscle relaxation exercise to help you relax and cope with stress, there is an excellent exercise in Annex A.**

### **Case example 2: Peer support and prayer groups help stop Vivian, port health officer, from feeling overwhelmed and out-of-touch with her place of worship**

Vivian has worked as a Port Health Officer at a busy border crossing for almost 10 years, and has enjoyed her work ever since she started. Vivian normally works five days a week and spends much of her time outside of work volunteering for her local place of worship.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vivian has found herself working a lot of overtime. Vivian has not been able to attend prayer services for several weeks and has no time or energy to volunteer for her local place of worship. Despite having access to enough personal protective equipment (PPE), Vivian remains concerned that her work might expose her and her family and friends to being infected with the virus, because she is conducting thousands of temperature readings and hundreds of throat swabs each week.

Vivian has been under a lot of pressure as the people screened are often stressed and angry and blame her for the delays in getting tested and in getting their results back. They shout at her and sometimes crowd around her, which makes her afraid of contracting COVID-19. Vivian has also felt that members of her place of worship do not want her to attend service because of her work. Understandably, Vivian is feeling increasingly overwhelmed.

**Vivian shared her concerns with a close colleague who faced similar issues and they decided to organize a peer support group for all their colleagues. They also decided to speak with their supervisor about the need for proper rest in between shifts.**

She realized that even if she could not volunteer for her place of worship, or attend services in person, she could still seek the support and comfort through her faith. Vivian and her colleagues decided to organize prayers at their place of work where social distancing and wearing of masks is always observed. The religious service could be organized together with

their religious leader over the internet or over the phone.

Through the social support of her colleagues in the peer support group, and after establishing their prayer group at work, Vivian feels re-energized. She now feels that she can better cope with the stress of her work.



Photo: © IOM Sudan/Yasir Elbaker



**Remember** that **you can only control your own actions** and not the actions and decisions of others.

**Be realistic about what you can and cannot control** and try to be accepting and forgiving of the fact that you will not be able to help everyone.

## A useful aid which you can use to help visualize and identify what you can and cannot control is the 'circles of control'.

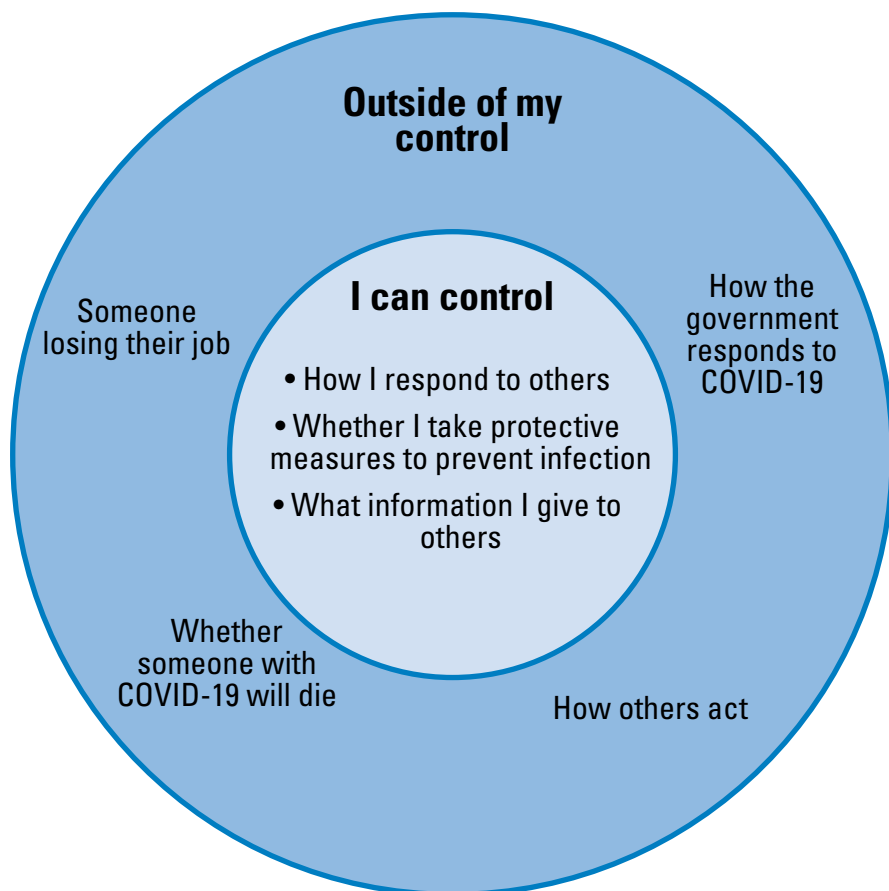
If you are feeling powerless to help others, it can be helpful to identify those problems you can do something about and those you cannot.

- Simply take a piece of paper and draw one large circle with a smaller circle inside.
- The smaller inner circle is what you can control yourself, such as your way of

speaking to others.

- Try to visualize and write down the things that you can control and put it inside this circle.
- Within the larger circle, you can put things which are outside of your control, such as a family member losing their job or that the government has closed schools.

### Example of a worker's circle of control



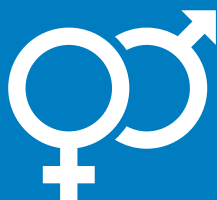
Source: IASC, Basic Psychosocial Skills A Guide for COVID-19 Responders, 2020. Annex C.



## Advice for managers and supervisors

As a manager and/or supervisor, you play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being, safety and health of workers and/or volunteers. You can use the skills described in this guide to

support staff and volunteers if they become distressed, and you can build supportive work environments that promote employee health and well-being.



### Gender-sensitivity in supporting staff well-being

Remember that female staff and volunteers might be experiencing increased levels of stress because of additional burdens associated with gender-roles at home – for example, with increased demands to care for children who are home due to school closures.

Female staff might also feel additional stress because of concerns about their own safety due to an increasing number of stressed and uncooperative people travelling through points of entry who might harass them and become violent.

### To support staff and volunteers, you can:

#### Self-care

1. Proactively encourage staff and volunteers to engage in positive self-care strategies.
2. Lead by example, through modelling healthy work behaviours (e.g. not working overtime).
3. Provide accurate, up-to-date and easy to understand information on staying safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Peer and supervisor support

4. Have regular meetings to discuss challenges, concerns and solutions.
5. Create an environment of collective care between teams and implement a buddy system and encourage peer support.
6. Be aware of staff and volunteers who may be in vulnerable or marginalized situations, and who may require additional support.
7. Ensure that staff and volunteers have regular breaks, and time to connect with family and friends.
8. Operate an open-door policy for staff and volunteers to report problems, preferably to someone different from their line manager.
9. Work to proactively address conflicts: emphasize the importance of a supportive

team environment, and model kindness and compassion towards oneself and other team members.

#### Capacity building

10. Prepare staff and volunteers by providing regular training for working as part of the COVID-19 response, including on safety and hygiene protocols; psychological first aid (PFA); relaxation and stress management; as well as training on anti-discrimination and combatting stigma associated with COVID-19.
11. Provide physical space, PPE and hygienic materials.
12. Establish referral mechanisms to other service providers and train staff and volunteers on how to make safe referrals.



### Case example 3: Elizabeth, manager at border crossing, creates open door policy and supports a supervisor overwhelmed by his duties

Elizabeth works at a border crossing in Southern Africa. A few months before the COVID-19 pandemic, Elizabeth was promoted to a manager position. She is now managing several teams, including Eric's: Eric is a supervisor for the team responsible for fumigating and cleaning the facilities and the vehicles passing through the border crossing.

Since the government recently lifted restrictions on movement, cross-border movements and trade has resumed to almost normal levels. Increased requirements for screening, testing and infection prevention and control (IPC) measures have put an additional burden on Elizabeth and her colleagues' workload.

**Elizabeth knows that this is a stressful time for everyone, and she is implementing an "open door" policy, welcoming anybody willing to report an issue or just to have a chat.**

Elizabeth was told by one colleague that the group supervisor, Eric, has been working overtime and that he seems overwhelmed. As a result, Eric has recently lost his temper with several people passing through the border crossing and got involved in several arguments including with his colleagues.

**Elizabeth realized that she needed to implement additional measures to increase her staff well-being.**

Elizabeth established regular team meetings where she and her colleagues could discuss their challenges, fears and concerns.

Elizabeth told Eric that that she appreciated his hard work but that he also needed to take care of himself. Elizabeth and Eric agreed that she would ask two colleagues to share some of Eric's supervisory



Disinfection of truck at border. Photo: © IOM Kenya

functions to reduce Eric's workload. Elizabeth also asked two additional colleagues to support the supervision, to ensure that they themselves would not become overwhelmed.

After only a few days, Eric was feeling less overwhelmed and able to cope with stress. Eric and his team felt they were working in a supportive environment where they could rely on each other. Elizabeth ensured that the whole team attended the regular team meetings and she also established a buddy system to make sure that colleagues would have additional opportunities to speak to each other about their well-being on a regular basis.

As you read  
this guidance,  
please follow the  
instructions.

Do not simply  
read about it;  
actually do it!

## SECTION 3

### Communication skills for everyday interactions

***At the end of this section you will know about the importance of self-care and some techniques and activities that you can do to support your own well-being.***

People who walk through a point of entry might also feel isolated, stressed, worried and confused about their well-being, livelihood and future because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following are examples of stressors and vulnerable groups:

- Those separated from their family and friends, especially unaccompanied and separated children;
- Having lost their income and livelihood opportunities due to the pandemic;
- Feeling worried about becoming stuck on one side of the border in case of tightened travel restrictions;
- Feeling stigmatized and/or subject to xenophobia and racism, because of people's suspicions and fears that travellers might bring the virus to their community.
- Sometimes you may meet persons with disabilities with minimal support and who may be more vulnerable as a result of the virus due to having lost vital hands-on support as a result of social distancing guidelines.
- Women and girls who, for example, may be at greater risk of GBV and child marriage as a result of the pandemic.



**Not all vulnerabilities will be visible or obvious, so it is important to respond in a caring and empathetic way to everyone you encounter.**

Through your everyday interactions and set of communication skills, you can support the well-being of those you interact with and/or have to support at a point of entry. Always treat all travelers, migrants, displaced and mobile populations with respect and dignity. Everybody should be treated with equity and without discrimination.

Remember that the way you present yourself and your communication with people (including your choice of words, your tone of voice, your posture and body language) will affect how people see you and respond to you.





If you use basic PSS skills and treat people with respect and dignity, they are more likely to trust you, be open to your support, and adhere to your advice.

### **Case example 4: Charles, border crossing security officer, uses relaxed body language and friendly demeanor to maintain calm**

Charles is a military police officer working at a border crossing in a cross-border town, where many people regularly cross the border for work, social gatherings and to go to school. Charles always makes sure to keep a relaxed posture; he avoids crossing his arms and holding his weapon in his hands and instead keeps it hanging from his shoulder-strap.

**Charles always tries to greet people with a smile and a friendly “hello” and “how are you?”.**

Since the pandemic, some people have become concerned that the border might close and that they may not be welcome in the neighbouring country. However, many people have told Charles that his friendly attitude and relaxed body language make them feel more secure and less concerned about crossing the border.

## **How to make others feel more comfortable with you through everyday communication skills**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people will experience some of the stress, described in Section 2.

Some people passing through a point of entry might even believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is exaggerated and that there is no need for them to be screened as they pass through the point of entry. Other people might feel that they are being subjected to unfair treatment. Some might be uncooperative, and resist being screened and tested because they do not believe the virus is real; or because they are afraid that they might test positive and be placed in an isolation facility.

Even when someone appears aggressive or confused, you can communicate more effectively (and potentially reduce a tense situation) by approaching them in a kind and respectful way.

Below are some general “do’s” and “don’ts” if you want to communicate with others in a respectful and supportive

**For a person to feel supported by you, they first need to trust you and feel comfortable with you.**



Photo: © IOM Kenya

## Everyday communication skills: Dos and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Clearly introduce yourself – your name and role.	Don't assume that the person knows who you are or what your role is at the point of entry or in the COVID-19 response.
Look at the person (but make sure to use only culturally appropriate eye contact to ensure that the person feels respected, relaxed and heard).	Don't look away, down at the floor or at your phone, or use inappropriate eye contact or stare at the person.
Listen actively to identify the concerns and emotions of the other person.	Don't pressure the person to speak if they do not want to. Avoid any distractions, such as answering the phone in the middle of your conversation. Do not interrupt unless it is to ask for clarification.
Ask gentle and probing questions – asking the person open questions (for example: when, where, what, who?).	Don't ask "why?" or "why so?," and avoid being judgmental or condescending. Also try to avoid asking closed questions – questions to which there is a Yes or No answer.
Keep an open, relaxed posture.	Don't cross your arms.



DO	DON'T
Be patient and calm. It is important to maintain a soft tone of voice and a moderate volume.	Don't stress or repeatedly interrupt the person speaking. It is also important that you don't shout or speak quickly.
If you are wearing PPE, such as a mask, then try to have a photo of yourself attached onto your clothing or write your name with a marker where it can be easily seen.	Don't assume that the person knows what you look like if you are wearing PPE (e.g. mask).
Confirm that the person is comfortable speaking with you. E.g. "Are you comfortable speaking to me (a man)? If you would like to speak to a woman, I can arrange for my colleague to speak with you".  Disability is also a consideration. E.g. the person may need to lip read and be unable to communicate if you are wearing a mask. You may need to find an alternative means of communicating such as through a screen or a poster.	Don't assume that the person is comfortable speaking to you.
Maintain physical distance to reduce COVID-19 infection and explain why. If possible, try to meet outside, in a large room, through a screen, or over the phone.	Don't put yourself or others at risk of COVID-19 infection by ignoring physical distancing rules. If you are wearing a mask, taking it off might also make the other person feel more stressed about being at risk of infection.
Acknowledge the feelings of the other person.	Don't appear cold or unmoved, in the face of a person's distress.
Recognize that the emotions and reactions of the other person are normal and can be expected in a stressful situation.	Don't try and overcompensate and give false promises or assurances.
Allow ample time for the other person to process his or her emotions and to ventilate distressing feelings.	Don't talk about yourself or your own personal life, and don't share someone else's story or experiences. Avoid offering advice and making assumptions about their concerns.
Assure them of confidentiality if this is necessary.	Don't exploit the trust and confidentiality shared.

## The importance of active listening

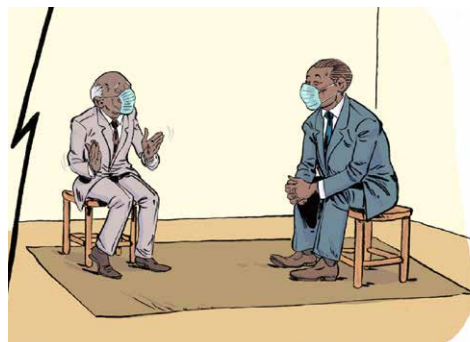
### Listening is the most essential part of a supportive communication.

It is important to allow people to express their concerns and feelings, and to do so in their own choice of words. Avoid offering advice and making assumptions about their

concerns. Instead listen carefully so that you can understand their situation, concerns and needs. If you do so, the person will likely feel calmer and more comfortable speaking with you. Together, you can then identify appropriate next steps that might be supportive to their well-being.

**Active listening** is an approach to listening that involves full concentration, listening to understand the perspective of the speaker, and responding thoughtfully with regard for the speaker's situation, concerns and needs.

The effective use of active listening will make the person feel heard, help them feel calmer, and it will help you better understand the concerns and well-being of the person you are talking to.



A key component of active listening is to acknowledge that you are listening and understanding the concerns of the other person. This can be done by following a few general tips:

- Remain respectful and **allow the person to talk without interruption** and at his/her own speed. To help facilitate such conversations it is important that you try to avoid any distractions, such as answering the phone in the middle of your conversation.
- **If there is something that is not clear**, you can also ask the person to repeat or



**If you can make someone feel supported and listened to, you are actively supporting the person's psychosocial well-being.**

clarify what he/she was trying to explain. For example, you could say: *"I'm sorry to interrupt. I think I may have missed something in that last statement you just made. Would you remind repeating what you just said?"*

- During your conversation, **periodically re-phrase or paraphrase the core messages** of what the person is saying. It is important that you do not attempt to analyse or interpret their feelings for them, but rather describe what you have heard by using their own words. For example: *"I understand that you feel extremely frustrated at having queued for so long"*. When you do this well, the person will know that you have paid attention to them and that person will feel better understood.
- Once the person has finished talking, you should try to **repeat what the person has just told you to confirm that you have been listening and that you understand**. For example: *"I understand that you feel stressed about having to wait for the COVID-19 test result while your family is waiting for you at home"*.

- To **show that you are indeed actively listening to the other person you can use supportive phrases to show empathy** (“I understand that what you have experienced is stressful”) and

acknowledge any losses or difficult feelings that the person shares (“*I am sorry to hear that*”; “*That sounds like a tough situation*”).

### Always remember to:

- Be aware of both your choice of words and your body language.
- Be sure to speak and behave in ways that are appropriate and respectful, according to the person's culture, age, gender and religion.
- Not pressure the person to speak about something that they do not want to speak about. It is important to listen to their objections but also to study their body language to notice signs of discomfort.

## Case example 5: Robert, customs agent, meets angry truck drivers and de-escalates the tense situation

Robert works as a customs agent at a border crossing. The respective national governments have decided that every truck driver who enters their country must show a certificate of a negative COVID-19 test result or first undergo a COVID-19 test, before being allowed to enter.

Due to the high number of long-distance truck drivers delivering food and other supplies, there has been a build-up on the roads as the test results are delayed from the lab. Truck drivers and others waiting to cross the border are getting increasingly frustrated and agitated. Some truck drivers feel that they are met with suspicion from the local community and that they are not welcomed there because people are afraid that the truck drivers will infect them with COVID-19.

One afternoon, a group of three agitated men approached Robert who had just finished inspecting a truck's cargo. They

were frustrated about having to wait for several days in a traffic build-up at the border crossing before being tested for COVID-19. They felt stigmatized by the local community and some had been prohibited by local shopkeepers from buying water and food.

### Robert understood their concerns, but he first wanted to calm the group down.

When Robert spoke to them, he used a soft tone of voice and moderate volume, he also puts his work to the side and suggested that they all sit somewhere in the shade so that they could tell him more. Robert also offered the men some water before sitting down.

By speaking to them in a mild and respectful way, making them more comfortable, and acknowledging their concerns while explaining the screening procedures, Robert was able to de-escalate the tense situation.



Photo: © IOM Kenya

## Conflict de-escalation through supportive communication

As we can see in Robert's case above, you might come across people who are frustrated and irritated. People passing through a point of entry might become upset and angry as they wait in long lines before crossing, while others will resist and harass the health care workers and port health officers who are conducting the temperature screenings and taking swab samples. People who are refused entry because of their immigration status might become aggressive if denied passage through the point of entry. A cross-border trader might feel resentment towards the law enforcement personnel who are monitoring the closure of a border crossing.

**There are often both visual and verbal signs that a person is upset, and you can look for several of these signs in a person's behaviour to assess whether the conflict is going to escalate and become worse, including:**

- Clenching their fists and/or tightening and untightening their jaw;
- Changing the type of eye contact, such as starting to stare;
- Bullying methods through e.g. yelling, use of profanities and personal verbal attacks;
- Defying safety and infection prevention and control (IPC) regulations, and refusing to comply when reminded of these.

**If you come into contact with a person who is showing these signs, you can make excellent use of the following communication skills to de-escalate the situation. You can also refer to the Dos and Don'ts list above.**

When trying to de-escalate a situation and a potential conflict, you should

- Calm yourself down first and take deep breaths. It is important that you remain calm and composed when in contact with someone who is in an agitated state.
- Assess the situation and the person(s) in front of you and the location you are in. If you do not feel safe, seek help and safety.
- Use a soft tone of voice and a moderate volume when addressing the other person. Shouting will only make the other person more aggressive, while a softer tone of voice and volume can make the other person unconsciously lower their voice too.
- Look as non-threatening as possible and this includes keeping your hands visible and in front of your body.
- Try to make the other person more comfortable and encourage them to sit down. If they prefer to stand, you should

also do so, to place yourself at the same level as them.

- Respect the physical distancing rule and IPC requirements, staying at least 1m from each other. If this cannot be done, you should follow the IPC protocols and seek support.
- Try to make a personal connection by simply asking for the other person's name. People normally respond positively to being spoken to by their name and this can help diffuse a tense situation

### Do not:

- Become defensive even if insulted.
- Use physical force or violence.
- Point your fingers at the other person, cross your arms, shrug your shoulders or roll your eyes.
- Make any promises that you cannot keep.



### Remember:

If the de-escalation efforts are not working, you should stop!  
If you feel unsafe, leave and call for help.

## SECTION 4

### Offering information and making referrals

***In this section you will learn more about the importance of offering basic information and the importance of making referrals for those in need of additional support and essential services.***

#### Providing information on basic services

Rumours and misinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic are creating confusion and contributing to increased levels of uncertainty and stress. People need accurate information on COVID-19 and IPC measures, to help them protect themselves and their loved ones. Many people are understandably afraid of becoming infected, losing family and friends to the disease, and being placed in quarantine if testing positive.

Even if you are well aware and up-to-date on the latest information and guidance on how to keep yourself and others safe, and how to access services and support in your area, do not assume that this is the case for the person passing through the point of entry.

For example, a migrant might not have been reached with any information while on the move. Further, he or she may have received insufficient information or been subject to rumors and misinformation about what COVID-19 is, how it spreads, and how you protect yourself and others from infection.

It is essential that you support people by providing clear and accurate information on IPC measures, and what basic services are available to those in need, to help alleviate some of the stress.

**It is recommended that you provide clear and up-to-date information to people waiting to pass through the point of entry.**

If the people who are about to pass through the point of entry are not provided with clear information about approximate waiting times and the procedures, they might become increasingly concerned and distressed. A pregnant woman might faint while queuing, and a child might start crying as she loses sight of her mother.

Even if a person is well-aware of IPC measures, he or she might feel worried

because they do not know the infection rate on your side of the border, how they would access health care in case they test positive, and how they will be perceived by the local community. Therefore, it is essential that you support people by providing clear and accurate information on IPC measures, and what basic services are available to those in need, to help alleviate some of the stress.



Use clear, concise language and avoid using technical slang or jargon.

When speaking with children, make sure to adapt information so it is age appropriate.

Provide information from reputable and official sources only, such as the national government and WHO. See [www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019](http://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019)

At points of entry and their vicinities, try to have written materials with visual aids available, in all relevant languages.

When needed, have a translator present.

### Consider obstacles to women's and children's access to services

These may include issues of emotional distress and fear, discrimination, security, costs, privacy, language, and cultural (e.g. need for permission or accompaniment of male relative).



Photo: © UNICEF/UNI315535/Ongoro

## Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) is a form of gender-based violence (GBV) that constitutes an abuse of power. It is based in gender inequality, power imbalances and disrespect of human rights. SEA can happen in any setting, against anyone, but the risks of SEA increase in emergencies settings. Anyone can commit SEA but those with more power are more likely to perpetrate it, while those with less power are vulnerable to becoming victims. United Nations (UN) personnel, their implementing partners or other aid workers always have more power over those we are there to serve.

The term Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) is used by the UN and its partners to refer to measures taken to protect vulnerable people from SEA by their staff and associated personnel, and to

ensure an adequate response when abuses occur. These measures aim to prevent SEA from occurring in the first place, follow up on the allegations quickly and effectively, and to ensure survivors receive appropriate response services.

**It is ALL humanitarian and development actors' responsibility to protect affected people from SEA and act when they have knowledge or suspicion of an incident.**

The Secretary General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse<sup>5</sup> applies to all UN agencies and their personnel, contractors (both institutional and individual) and their implementing partners. **You can find more information on PSEA in the resources section below.**

## Linking to basic services and making referrals

When anyone passing through a point of entry needs access to basic services, PSS and/or specialized mental health services, you should be able to immediately refer them to the appropriate service provider.

You should do so when you come across a person in serious distress or those who may need urgent medical or social services to ensure their health, safety and protection.

## Work with your supervisors and colleagues to ensure that you have the necessary referral pathways to other service providers in place.

If there are no established referral pathways, bring this up with you supervisors. If you do not know how to make a safe referral to another service provider, you should ask for training. Regardless of your line of work, you should be able to refer people in need to service providers of essential services, such as:

- Health care
- Shelter
- Child protection

- GBV
- Services for women and girls such as for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRSH)
- Legal services including to claim asylum
- MHPSS

**Most people experiencing stress will feel better when having their basic needs met and when receiving basic PSS**

5 United Nations, Secretary General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 2003 <https://undocs.org/ST/SGB/2003/13>

## There should be clear referral pathways and protocols in place between your organization and those actors which provide essential services to those in need.

For example:

- Children who have become separated from their caregivers before reaching the point of entry will require referral to child protection services for case management, such as family tracing and placement into alternative care.
- An individual who has been sexually abused will need to be referred to GBV service providers to receive the appropriate protection, PSS, medical and legal support services.
- A mother and her children who have fled from their country of origin might need shelter, healthcare, PSS and nutritional support; and might want to seek asylum.

Take gender considerations into account such as barriers to women and girls accessing services (see the box below).

In order for you to effectively link people to other service providers, you must first know what services are available, what referral pathways exists and how to make a safe referral.

Use **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for making MHPSS referrals**, to assist you in following all the necessary steps. See the resources section below.



The existence of clear, safe and appropriate referral pathways is key to ensure the long-term well-being and protection of vulnerable people passing through a point of entry.

## ANNEX A

### IASC Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script

This is a script that was developed by the IASC (2020) and it can be used to carry out progressive muscular relaxation.

You can use this exercise for yourself as one of your self-care strategies, and you may also be able to offer it to others, such as people you may be helping.

**If you use it with others, remember to keep a calming tone of voice as you give the instructions below and speak slowly, allowing ample time for people to experience the full effect of relaxation.**



### Progressive muscle relaxation script

As we breathe, we will do some progressive muscle relaxation so that you can feel the difference between tension and relaxation in your muscles. We are not often aware when we hold tension in our bodies. These exercises will make us more aware and give us a way to release the tension.

Close your eyes and sit straight in your chair. Place your feet on the floor and feel the ground under your feet. Relax your hands in your lap. As you breathe in, I will ask you to tense and tighten certain muscles in your body. As you tense and hold the muscles, you will hold your breath for a count of three, then relax them completely when I tell you to breathe out.

Let's begin with our toes...

#### **Lead the person through progressive muscle relaxation SLOWLY.**

Ask them to tense a part of their body and to inhale and hold their breath while you count aloud slowly, like this: Inhale and hold your breath, 1 — 2 —3 —. Then say: Exhale and relax.

Give a slight rise to your voice as you say: Inhale and hold your breath and bring your voice down as you say: Exhale and relax.

Have the person tense and relax their muscles in this order:

- Curl your toes tightly and hold the tension strongly.
- Tense your thigh and leg muscles.
- Tense your belly, holding it in.
- Make fists of your hands.
- Tense your arms by bending at the elbows and bringing your arms tight alongside your upper body.
- Shrug your shoulders up to your ears.
- Tense all your facial muscles.

After they have exhaled and relaxed each part of their body, say: ...Now feel your [toes, thighs, belly, etc.] relaxed. Breathe normally. Feel the blood come into your [toes, thighs, etc.].

Now, drop your chin slowly toward your chest. As you inhale, slowly and carefully rotate your head in a circle to the right, exhale as you bring your head around to the left and back toward your chest. Inhale to the right and back ... exhale to the left and down. Inhale to the right and back ... exhale to the left and down. Now, reverse directions ... inhale to the left and back, exhale to the right and down (repeat twice).

Now bring your head up to the centre. Notice the calm in your mind and body.

Make a commitment now to take care of yourself each and every day.

# ANNEX B

## Useful Resources

### Taking care of your own well-being

- Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide 2020 (WHO) [www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927)
- One-pager on coping with stress in COVID-19 (WHO) [www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/coping-with-stress.pdf?sfvrsn=9845bc3a\\_2](http://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/coping-with-stress.pdf?sfvrsn=9845bc3a_2)
- 14-day Well-being Diary (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) Psychosocial Centre) <https://pscentre.org/?resource=14-day-well-being-kit-all-english>
- Basic Psychosocial Skills: A Guide for COVID-19 Responders, 2020 (IASC) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-05/Basic%20Psychosocial%20Skills-%20A%20Guide%20for%20COVID-19%20Responders.pdf>
- Video: Peer Support and Buddy Systems (IFRC Psychosocial Centre) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8duHXBkTp8>

### Advice for managers and supervisors

- IASC, MHPSS in Humanitarian Emergencies: What should Protection Programme Managers Know? 2010 [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy\\_files/MHPSS%20Protection%20Actors.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/MHPSS%20Protection%20Actors.pdf)

### Psychological First Aid

- Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide 2020 (WHO) [www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927)
- One-pager on coping with stress in COVID-19 (WHO) [www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/coping-with-stress.pdf?sfvrsn=9845bc3a\\_2](http://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/coping-with-stress.pdf?sfvrsn=9845bc3a_2)

- 14-day Well-being Diary (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) Psychosocial Centre) <https://pscentre.org/?resource=14-day-well-being-kit-all-english>
- Basic Psychosocial Skills: A Guide for COVID-19 Responders, 2020 (IASC) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-05/Basic%20Psychosocial%20Skills-%20A%20Guide%20for%20COVID-19%20Responders.pdf>
- Video: Peer Support and Buddy Systems (IFRC Psychosocial Centre) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8duHXBkTp8>
- Online Training: PFA for COVID-19 (IFRC – Psychosocial Centre) <https://pscentre.org/?resource=online-pfa-training-for-covid-19>
- o Training module: PFA for COVID-19 – Caring for staff and volunteers <https://pscentre.org/?resource=online-pfa-training-for-covid-19-additional-module-caring-for-staff-and-volunteers>
- o Training module: PFA for children during COVID-19 <https://pscentre.org/?resource=online-pfa-training-for-covid-19-additional-module-pfa-for-children>

### Making PSS referrals

- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for MHPSS Referrals (East and Southern Africa COVID-19 MHPSS Working Group) (forthcoming)

### PSEA

- Learning Package on Protection from Sexual Misconduct for UN partner organizations (IASC) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-learning-package-protection-sexual-misconduct-un-partner-organizations>

## ANNEX C

### My Cheat Sheet for a safe referral to services

Remember to use the **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)** for making MHPSS referrals, to assist you in following all the necessary steps.

Support service	Phone number	Record the names of contact persons here
Emergency medical service		
Social worker 1		
Social worker 2		
Legal Advisor		
Refugee Officer		
Women's Service		
Child Friendly Space		
Nutritional Support		
Mental Health Care Provider		
Counsellor		
GBV services		
Etc.		







## Basic Psychosocial Support Skills

A guide for Service Providers at Points of Entry in Eastern and Southern Africa