



EMOTIONAL FIRST AID TIPSHEET

- A Feminist Approach -

Prepared by

Meena C., Pupul Lama, and Shahanoor A. Chowdhury

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) is an advocacy collective of activists, practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and academicians working globally to end violence against women and girls (VAWG).

COFEM aims to build a community and foster collective action in which feminist-informed theory and practice on oppression, discrimination and violence are the core of efforts to address gender-based violence (GBV). We prioritize women-centred, women-led initiatives and advocate for intersectional feminist approaches to promote gender equity, human rights, dignity, and safety through collective actions.

As part of our evolving work, "promoting wellness and collective care" has been identified as one of COFEM's strategic priorities for 2024-25. This priority underscores the importance of sustaining emotional well-being for those working in feminist and humanitarian spaces. It also provides a strong foundation for member-led initiatives such as Emotional First Aid (EFA), which aims to empower practitioners with tools to address immediate emotional distress in their interactions with stakeholders.

The EFA initiative emerged as a member-driven idea, responding to the need for immediate emotional support tools. A needs assessment survey, with input from fifteen participants, highlighted priorities that were further refined during a learning event. This tipsheet is the result of collective contributions designed to equip feminist advocates with practical EFA tools and guidance.

Clarifying Usability

This EFA tipsheet is a feminist-centred resource tailored for non-mental health professionals, including humanitarian workers, community organisers, and feminist practitioners. It acknowledges the embedded need for emotional care within feminist and humanitarian work, offering practical, accessible guidance for supporting women in their diversities affected by gender-based violence (GBV). Rooted in feminist principles, the tipsheet provides actionable tools for empathetic and effective responses while emphasising the importance of self-awareness, boundary-setting, and emotional well-being for practitioners themselves. Designed to bridge gaps in preparedness, it empowers users to engage in collective emotional care with compassion and accountability. While this resource primarily focuses on supporting adult survivors, practitioners working with minors may need additional considerations. We encourage referring to child-specific safeguarding and trauma-informed resources for appropriate guidance.

HOW TO USE THIS TIPSHEET?

PART I

sets the context of this tipsheet through a section on GBV and Mental Health, followed by an introduction to the practice, principles and practitioners of EFA.

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PART 2

covers practical strategies for EFA. This section is intended to help practitioners understand the processes of EFA. It can be approached as a step-by-step guide to understanding EFA as a method.

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PART 3

delves deeply into the skills that a practitioner would have to learn and hone over time to be effective at EFA. This tipsheet is peppered with examples to help practitioners understand the real-life application of various para-therapeutic tools.¹

¹ Para-therapeutic tools refer to structured techniques that support emotional well-being and crisis response outside of formal therapy. In the context of EFA, these tools may include active listening strategies, grounding exercises, guided reflection, and other practical approaches that help individuals navigate distressing situations in a supportive, non-clinical manner.

Gender-Based Violence and Mental Health



Feminist practitioners must understand the mental health impact of GBV when providing emotional support to survivors because GBV often results in trauma due to survivors' experiences of guilt, shame, and/or self-blame.

This trauma can manifest as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other mental health challenges. Understanding these responses helps practitioners provide empathetic, non-judgmental support for survivors to share their experiences in a safe, supportive environment. Recognizing the mental health impact allows practitioners to be sensitive to triggers and avoid causing further distress.

Survivors often feel a loss of control due to their experiences, and mental health issues can exacerbate these feelings of powerlessness. Practitioners who understand these impacts and different interventions can help survivors regain agency and confidence. For instance, someone dealing with PTSD might need trauma-informed care, while someone with depression might benefit from affirming their strengths and resilience.

Feminist practitioners often work to dismantle harmful stereotypes and stigmas around both mental health and GBV at personal and systemic levels. Emotional support must address both the immediate emotional needs and the long-term psychological impacts of GBV. A mental health-informed approach ensures survivors receive comprehensive care.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL FIRST AID?

Based on the principles of psychological first aid (PFA) and mental health first aid (MHFA), EFA is a practice aimed at providing immediate emotional support to individuals in moments of distress, ensuring they feel heard and supported without delving into long-term therapeutic interventions. EFA focuses on emotional stabilization, helping individuals regain composure and clarity during or after a crisis. Unlike therapy, which seeks to address deep-seated emotional issues over time, EFA can operate in real-time, using techniques rooted in empathy and feminist principles, and it is provided in both crisis/emergency settings and an ongoing/protracted crisis situation.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

EFA is non-judgmental and emphasizes emotional containment rather than problem-solving.

EFA, rooted in feminist principles, ensures that interventions respect agency, confidentiality, and equality.

EFA is highly adaptable and used by practitioners such as field officers, researchers, and social workers in diverse environments.



EXAMPLE

In a conflict-affected region, a temporary displacement camp has been set up for women, girls, and other vulnerable populations who have fled violence. Reports indicate that women in the camp are at high risk of sexual exploitation and abuse due to inadequate lighting, shared sleeping areas, and limited access to basic necessities like food and water. In that setting, a social worker encounters a survivor who has escaped an abusive situation. The survivor is visibly distraught, overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty about their future. Through EFA, the worker listens without judgment, validating the survivor's emotions and reassuring them of their strength in seeking safety. The worker creates a sense of immediate stability by offering supportive language and ensuring the survivor feels physically and emotionally safe. They then guide the survivor toward appropriate GBV-specific services, such as safe shelter, legal aid, or counseling, ensuring the referral respects the survivor's agency and choices.

WHO CAN PROVIDE EMOTIONAL FIRST AID?

EFA for survivors of GBV can be provided by a range of individuals and professionals, depending on the context and the survivor's immediate needs.

Key providers include:



*Trained
First
Responders*

- **Crisis Hotline Workers** are often the first point of contact for survivors seeking help and are trained to provide emotional support and practical guidance.
- When properly trained in trauma-informed care, **Police or Emergency Services Personnel** can offer immediate emotional support while ensuring the survivor's safety.



*Healthcare
Professionals*

- **Doctors and Nurses**, especially in emergency rooms, may encounter survivors of GBV and provide compassionate care alongside medical treatment.
- **Mental Health Professionals**, such as therapists, counselors, psychologists, and social workers specializing in trauma, can offer emotional support and guidance.



*Community-
Based
Practitioners*

- **Social Workers**, trained to handle crisis situations, can provide EFA and connect survivors to resources.
- **Feminist Practitioners or Advocates** bring a gender-sensitive perspective and are often trained in trauma-informed care to effectively support survivors.



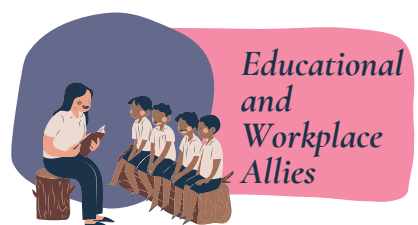
*Peer Support
Networks*

- **Survivor Support Groups and Fellow Survivors** can offer EFA by sharing experiences, providing validation, and fostering a sense of solidarity.
- **Trusted Friends, Family Members, and Close Contacts** can provide immediate comfort and a listening ear, though they may need guidance on how to offer support without judgment.



*Volunteers
and
Community
Leaders*

- **Volunteers trained in GBV response** by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or community organizations can offer EFA in shelters, crisis centers, or outreach programs.
- **Faith-based leaders or other trusted community figures** may support survivors, provided they understand their needs and respect their choices.



*Educational
and
Workplace
Allies*

- **Teachers or School Counselors**, trained in trauma-informed approaches can provide immediate support to young survivors and help them access further resources.
- In workplace settings, trained personnel such as **HR Representatives or Workplace Counselors** can offer EFA and connect survivors to appropriate resources.

FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN EFA AND ITS IMPORTANCE

EFA's feminist principles ensure that support is rooted in respect, equality, and empowerment. These principles safeguard individuals' dignity by fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.



Practice Reflexivity: Feminist practitioners continually evaluate their biases, behaviors, and assumptions to ensure their interventions are unbiased and effective. This reflective process helps them avoid imposing personal judgments on those in distress.

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Uphold Self-Determination: Survivors maintain control over their decisions, with practitioners serving as facilitators rather than decision-makers. This reinforces the survivor's agency and autonomy.

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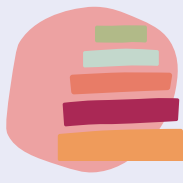
Maintain Confidentiality: Sharing distress often involves vulnerability. Maintaining confidentiality builds trust and ensures individuals feel secure in expressing themselves.

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Be Non-Judgmental: Feminist practitioners provide empathetic, bias-free responses, ensuring individuals feel validated rather than criticized or dismissed.

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Address Power Dynamics: Feminist practitioners are mindful of inherent power imbalances and strive to create an environment where individuals feel equal and respected.

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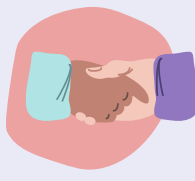


Contribute to Social Justice: Feminist EFA goes beyond individual support to challenge systemic inequalities that contribute to distress and trauma. Practitioners recognize the broader socio-political context of violence and work towards dismantling oppressive structures.

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Celebrate Diversity: Feminist practitioners acknowledge and honor diverse identities, experiences, and cultural contexts. They ensure that their support is inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of individuals across different backgrounds.



Foreground Consent: Every interaction in EFA is guided by the principle of consent. Practitioners seek explicit permission before offering support, respecting individuals' right to accept or decline assistance on their own terms.





EXAMPLE

A young woman approaches a field officer to share her experience of workplace harassment, feeling unsafe and uncertain about what to do. Applying EFA's feminist principles, the officer practices self-reflection to ensure their support is unbiased and empathetic, asking themselves, "What power differentials are present in the relationship between myself and the survivor, and how might they shape this interaction? They prioritize the woman's self-determination by asking open-ended questions like, "What would you like to happen next?" instead of offering unsolicited advice. To build trust, they assure her of confidentiality and provide non-judgmental support by listening attentively and validating her feelings with empathetic responses. Mindful of power dynamics, the officer fosters equality through a collaborative tone and avoids imposing solutions. By listening attentively, the officer reduces her distress and empowers her to decide the next steps, ensuring she feels respected and in control.

Practical Strategies for Emotional First Aid



Implementing EFA effectively requires a combination of specific skills and thoughtful approaches grounded in feminist principles.

These strategies are designed to guide feminist practitioners, not necessarily mental health professionals, in providing immediate emotional support while adhering to feminist principles.

Emotional First Aiders will use a survivor-centered approach by practising:

Respect

All actions are guided by respect for the survivor's choices, wishes, rights and dignity.

Safety

The safety of the survivor is the number one priority.

Confidentiality

People have the right to choose to whom they will or will not tell their story. Maintaining confidentiality means not sharing any information with anyone.

Non-discrimination

The safety of the survivor is the number one priority.

Below each strategy is explained in detail with examples and step-by-step guidance for practical application. These strategies are integral to providing effective EFA. Feminist practitioners who incorporate these approaches not only offer immediate support but also empower individuals to navigate their emotional crises with dignity, confidence, empathy, and care.



Step 1:

Ensure Immediate Safety

- **Assess the environment:** Confirm that the person is in a safe physical space, away from any immediate threat.
- **Address urgent needs:** If the person is physically injured, assist in accessing medical care. Contact emergency services if necessary.
- **Provide practical support** like offering water, a private place to sit, a tissue, etc.
- **Provide reassurance:** Ask the survivor if they feel comfortable talking to you in your current location. If they are accompanied by someone, do not assume it is safe to talk to the survivor about their experience in front of that person (even if the accompanied person is a woman). Let the survivor know that they are safe with you and that you are there to support them.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN SAY:

“You seem to be in a lot of pain right now, would you like to go to the health clinic?”

“Does this place feel OK for you? Is there another place where you would feel better?”

“Would you like some water?”

“Do you feel comfortable having a conversation here?”

“Please feel free to have a seat.”



Step 2: Establish Trust and Connection

- **Listen actively:** Give the survivor your full attention, maintaining eye contact (if culturally appropriate) and using supportive gestures like nodding (see [Annex 1](#) -Active listening and [Annex 2](#) -Listening barriers for details)
 - **Acknowledge their courage:** Affirm their strength in reaching out for help.
 - **Prioritize their comfort and agency:** Do not pressure the survivor into sharing more information beyond what they feel comfortable sharing. The details of what happened and by whom are not important or relevant to your role in listening and providing information on available services.
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Step 3: *Provide Emotional Support*

- **Remember** your role is to listen without judgment, provide emotional support, and provide information on available services.
- **Recognize** their emotions and accept and validate any feelings of fear, anger, sadness, or confusion.
- **Validate** their experience and say statements of comfort (“I’m sorry this happened to you” or “I believe you”) and support to reinforce that what happened to them was not their fault (“What happened is not your fault”).
- **Share** referral options such as offering details about local crisis hotlines, shelters, or counseling services, ensuring the information is clear and accessible.
- **Follow** their lead and offer assistance based on what they express as their priorities.

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- **Understand** trauma reactions and be prepared for responses such as withdrawal, hypervigilance, or emotional numbness in a crisis situation.
 - **Help** calm them if they are overwhelmed. Guide them through grounding techniques like deep breathing or focusing on their immediate surroundings.

Avoid asking or saying:

- Unnecessary details about the violence or traumatic event to avoid re-traumatization. Focus on listening rather than questioning.
- What happened? Instead of seeking details, gently ask how you can support them or what they need at the moment. Center the conversation on their immediate needs and feelings.
- Comparing their experience with something that happened to another person. Each survivor's experience is unique and deserves validation without judgment.
- Suggesting that the situation is “not a big deal” or unimportant. Invalidating can limit the chances of building a trusting connection. What truly matters is how the survivor feels about their experience.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN SAY:

“I can share any information that I have on support available to you.”

“How can I support you?”

“I will try to support you as much as I can, but I am not a counselor.”

“Everything that we talk about together stays between us. I will not share anything without your permission.”

“Please share with me whatever you want to share. You do not need to tell me about your experience in order for me to provide you with information on support available to you.”





Step 4: Support with Care and Empowerment

- **Respect** the survivor's right to make their own decisions. Ask what they need and how you can support them. Let them know they do not have to make any decisions right now; they can change their mind and access services in the future
- **Provide** options for the next steps, such as accessing shelters, counselling, or medical care. Ask if there is someone they trust, like a friend, family member, or caregiver, who can provide support. In distressing situations, offering options helps a person because it is less of a strain to think through solutions with a trusted individual than on one's own.
- **Ask** for the survivor's permission before taking any action.
- **Do not assume** you know what someone wants or needs. Some actions may put the survivor at further risk of stigma, retaliation, or harm.
- **Do not assume** you fully understand someone's experience based on your own perspectives or prior knowledge. Each individual's experience is unique, and it is essential to listen without preconceived notions.
- **Provide support** without bias or judgment, regardless of a person's age, marital status, disability, religion, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, or the identity of the perpetrator(s).
- **Avoid** trying to make peace, reconcile, or resolve the situation between the survivor and anyone else (e.g., the perpetrator or any third person such as a family member, community committee member, community leader etc.).
- **Do not share** the details of the incident and the survivor's personal identifiers with anyone, including family members, police/security forces, community leaders, colleagues, supervisors, etc. Sharing this information can cause further harm to the survivor.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN SAY:

"There are some people/organizations that may be able to provide some support to you and/or your family. Would you like to know about them?"

"I cannot talk to anyone on your behalf to try to resolve the situation. But what I can do is support you during our conversation and listen to your concerns."

"It sounds like you have a plan for how you would like to go from here. That is a positive step."

"Here are the details of the service, including the location, times that the service is open, the cost (if applicable), transport options, and the person's name for who you can talk to."

"When it comes to the next steps, what you want and feel comfortable with is the most important consideration."

"Do not feel pressure to make any decisions now. You can take time to reflect and always change your mind in the future."



Step 5:

Maintain Confidentiality

- **Reassure** the survivor that their information will not be shared without their consent unless required for safety. Treat any information shared with confidentiality.
- **If you are obligated** due to mandatory reporting requirements, inform the survivor beforehand and involve them in the process.
- **If you need to seek advice** and guidance on how to best support a survivor, ask for their permission to talk to a specialist or colleague. Ensure you do this without revealing the survivor's personal identifiers.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN SAY:

"Is there anyone that you trust that you can go to for support, maybe a family member or a friend?"

"Would you like to use my phone to call anyone that you need at this moment?"



Step 6:
Follow Up Thoughtfully

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- **If the survivor is open to it**, check in to offer continued support.
 - **Respect boundaries** and avoid being intrusive or overly persistent in your follow-up.
 - **Encourage** ongoing care by suggesting long-term support options, such as therapy or peer support groups.
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Step 7:
Practice Self-Care as Practitioners

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- **Recognize** your limits and know when to involve specialized professionals.
- **Debrief responsibly** by sharing your experience with a supervisor or peer for emotional processing, if applicable.
- **Take care of yourself** by being aware of secondary trauma effects, including symptoms like stress and burnout, and ensure you have the necessary support and resources to continue providing compassionate care.
- **Practice self-care** through activities such as gratitude journaling, physical exercise and ensuring proper rest and sleep.

SELF-CARE TIPS FOR SURVIVORS OF GBV

Recognize your needs and limits

- Understand that healing is a journey, and it's okay to seek help from trained professionals, such as counselors or support groups when needed.
- Prioritize your well-being and avoid overburdening yourself emotionally or physically.

Create a safe space to process emotions

- Share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust, such as a supportive friend, family member, or counselor, to help you process your experiences.
- Journaling can be a powerful tool to reflect and release emotions. Consider keeping a gratitude journal to focus on positive moments, no matter how small.

Be aware of emotional and physical stress

- Notice signs of stress or emotional exhaustion, such as trouble sleeping, feeling overwhelmed, or physical symptoms like headaches or fatigue.
- Practice self-compassion and remind yourself that your reactions are valid responses to difficult circumstances.

Incorporate mindful practices

- Engage in mindfulness exercises, such as deep breathing, meditation, or grounding techniques, to manage stress and stay present.
- Explore activities that bring you joy and peace, whether it's listening to music, drawing, or spending time in nature.

Take care of your body

- Ensure you get adequate rest and sleep to support physical and emotional recovery.
- Incorporate gentle physical activities like yoga, stretching, or walking to help release tension and improve your mood.

Build a support network

- Connect with support groups or community resources focused on GBV survivors. Sharing experiences in a safe and understanding environment can be empowering.
- Reach out to local services for additional support, including legal, medical, or shelter assistance if needed.

Set healthy boundaries

- Limit interactions or activities that trigger negative emotions or drain your energy.
- Learn to say no when necessary and prioritize activities that contribute to your healing and happiness.

Self-care is an essential part of the recovery process. Taking small, intentional steps can help rebuild emotional resilience and a sense of control over your life. You deserve care, compassion, and time to heal.



Skills of Emotional First Aid





Active Listening

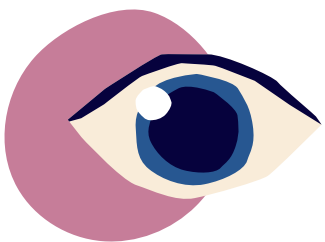
Active listening gives undivided attention to the speaker, aiming to understand their words, underlying emotions, experiences, and non-verbal cues.

Active listening requires feminist practitioners to focus entirely on the individual, avoiding distractions or preconceptions.

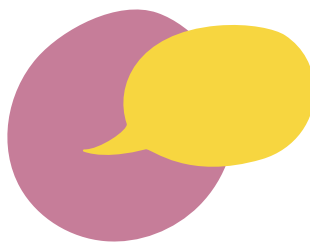
Key features of Active Listening are:

- **Attentiveness:** Avoid distractions and focus entirely on the speaker.
- **Non-judgmental attitude and empathy:** Adopt a non-judgmental attitude, which involves accepting a person's feelings and experiences without criticism or preconceived notions. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the emotions of others. Show understanding and compassion through verbal and nonverbal cues. Both of these are essential skills for providing EFA effectively.
- **Reflection:** Summarize or paraphrase the speaker's words to confirm understanding.

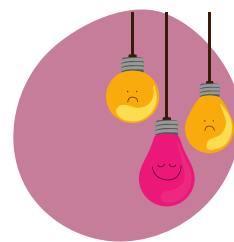
HOW TO APPLY ACTIVE LISTENING IN PRACTICE



Begin by making eye contact and ensuring an open body posture.



Use verbal affirmations like "I see," "That must be hard," or "Go on."



Paraphrase emotions using phrases such as, "It sounds like you're feeling..."



EXAMPLE

A humanitarian worker listens to a young woman sharing her experience of domestic violence. The woman expresses fear and self-blame, saying, “Maybe it’s my fault he gets so angry.” The officer practices active listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding, and using an open body posture to signal full attention. The officer responds empathetically, saying, “It sounds like you’re feeling scared and unsure if you’ve done something wrong. That must be incredibly difficult to carry.” This reflection validates the woman’s emotions, helps her feel understood, and encourages her to continue sharing in a safe and supportive environment.



Role of Silence

Silence can be a powerful tool in EFA. Allowing moments of silence gives individuals time to process their emotions and articulate their thoughts more clearly.

Allowing for moments of silence can:

- Show respect and patience,
- Encourage deeper sharing, and
- Prevent the practitioner from dominating the conversation.



EXAMPLE

During a pause in the conversation, a feminist practitioner resists the urge to speak, allowing the individual to gather their thoughts. This respectful silence fosters a more meaningful dialogue.



Attending Behavior

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Attending behavior is the use of non-verbal communication to demonstrate attentiveness and respect.

Techniques such as maintaining an open posture and eye contact show individuals that they are valued and supported, creating a safe, welcoming space for the survivor to open up about their emotions and feelings.

SOLER Strategy : It is a structured, formal method for active listening in counselling or professional environments to create a supportive and attentive atmosphere.



SIT SQUARELY:

Face the individual directly, showing availability



OPEN POSTURE:

Maintain an open posture, avoiding crossed arms or legs, which may seem defensive.



LEAN SLIGHTLY FORWARD:

Demonstrates interest and engagement.



EYE CONTACT:

Maintain natural, steady eye contact without staring.



RELAX:

Stay calm to put the individual at ease.

How to Apply Attending Behavior in Practice:

- Sit at a comfortable angle if direct facing feels intimidating.
- Use minimal movements like nodding or leaning in to indicate attentiveness.
- Avoid fidgeting or checking devices to eliminate distractions.

See [Annex 3](#) -Attending Skill and [Annex 4](#) -SOLER for details.



EXAMPLE

A counselor supports a young woman who has survived intimate partner violence. The survivor, visibly distressed, hesitates to speak, fearing judgment and stigma.

The counselor gently says, "Take your time. I'm here to listen whenever you're ready." They lean forward slightly, maintaining relaxed eye contact and an open posture, signaling attentiveness and trustworthiness.

When the survivor begins to share her experience, the counselor listens without interrupting or showing shock, anger, or pity. Instead, they nod occasionally, affirming with phrases like, "That must have been so difficult for you," and "You're incredibly brave for sharing this." As the survivor recounts her story, the counselor reflects on her emotions, saying, "It sounds like you've been feeling trapped and scared, but you've taken a huge step by coming here today."

By demonstrating non-judgmental listening and empathic understanding, the counselor creates a safe and supportive environment, enabling the survivor to feel validated and heard. This approach also sets the stage for empowering the survivor to explore further support options, like legal aid or trauma counseling, at her own pace.



Parallel Conversation

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Parallel conversation refers to managing the internal dialogue that often runs alongside active listening.

Feminist practitioners may find themselves preoccupied with what to say next, concerns about their effectiveness, or external distractions. Addressing this requires mindfulness and focus.

Key Steps:

- **Awareness:** Recognize when your thoughts drift away from the conversation.
- **Refocus:** Consciously redirect attention to the speaker.
- **Grounding:** Use techniques like deep breathing to remain present (See [Annex 5](#) -Grounding Techniques).

By managing their emotions effectively, EFA practitioners can maintain their ability to provide compassionate care while safeguarding their own mental health.

MANAGING EMOTIONS DURING AND AFTER PROVIDING EFA AS A PRACTITIONER

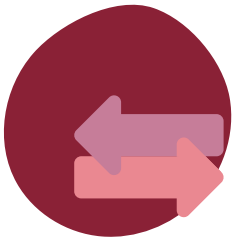
During the Provision of EFA

- **Stay Grounded:** Use deep breathing or grounding techniques to remain calm and focused while listening to the recipient.
- **Separate Emotions:** Recognize the recipient's emotions as their own and avoid internalizing them. Remind yourself that your role is to support, not to solve all their problems. Separating your emotions from the recipient's is part of the feminist ethic of centering the survivor and de-centering oneself. It also helps to deconstruct and be mindful of the power we carry to make the exchange about our own emotions instead of focusing on the survivor.

- **Use Empathy with Boundaries:** Practice empathic listening while maintaining emotional boundaries to avoid becoming overwhelmed.
- **Stay Present:** Focus fully on the recipient's words and emotions at the moment, avoiding assumptions or future-focused worries.
- **Acknowledge Internal Reactions:** If strong emotions arise, silently note them without letting them interfere with your ability to provide support.

After the Provision of EFA

- **Debrief Responsibly:** Share your experience with a trusted supervisor, peer, or counselor in a confidential and constructive way to process your emotions.
- **Engage in Self-Reflection:** Take time to understand how the interaction affected you emotionally and mentally. Journaling or mindfulness practices can help.
- **Practice Self-Care:** Prioritize activities that replenish your energy, such as exercise, rest, connecting with loved ones, or engaging in hobbies.
- **Seek Support When Needed:** If you notice signs of emotional exhaustion or secondary trauma, consider speaking with a mental health professional.
- **Set Boundaries:** Avoid dwelling excessively on the encounter by setting mental or emotional limits and focusing on your own well-being.



Listening & Reflecting Emotions

Reflecting emotions involves identifying and verbalizing the feelings expressed by the speaker.

This not only validates their experience but also helps clarify their emotions, fostering deeper understanding.

Steps to Reflect Emotions:

- Pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues (tone, body language).
- Use reflective statements like: “It seems as though you’re feeling...” or “What I’m hearing is that you’re experiencing...”

- Allow pauses for the individual to elaborate or correct your interpretation.



EXAMPLE

During an EFA session, a young survivor of domestic violence shares, "I feel like I'll never feel safe again. Every time I hear loud voices, I panic and can't think straight." The practitioner listens attentively, maintaining eye contact and an open posture, and responds gently, "It sounds like hearing loud voices brings back the fear and panic of what you went through, making it hard to feel safe." This empathetic reflection validates the survivor's feelings, acknowledges their trauma, and helps create a safe and trusting space for them to begin processing their emotions and moving toward healing.



Setting Boundaries

Boundaries are crucial to avoid role conflicts, particularly when feminist practitioners are expected to provide both emotional support and practical resources.

Effective boundary setting ensures the individual understands the scope of EFA while maintaining professional integrity. Spend time understanding what you can realistically offer someone in need. Self-awareness makes for better boundaries.

Best Practices:

- **Clarify Roles:** Explain your role as an emotional support provider upfront not a professional counselor

- **Avoid Overextension:** Redirect requests for help outside your expertise to appropriate channels.
- **Communicate Clearly:** Use phrases like, “I can support you emotionally, but I will connect you with someone who can assist with...”



EXAMPLE

A feminist practitioner provides EFA to a survivor of GBV perpetrated at an educational institution sets boundaries by saying, “I am not a counselor but I’m here to listen and support you emotionally. I will connect you with the available services as per your priority and needs.” [legal services, medical services, specialized mental health services, etc.]



Referrals

Referrals involve recognizing when an individual’s emotional needs exceed the scope of EFA and require specialized mental health intervention.

Understanding when and how to refer is critical for the individual’s well-being.

When to Refer?

- Persistent emotional distress impacting daily life.
- Symptoms of severe anxiety, depression, or trauma.
- Behavioral indications like hallucinations, paranoia, or suicidal thoughts.
- Survivor asks for specific services.

Steps for Effective Referral:

- Gently introduce the idea of seeking additional support.
- Provide information on trusted resources or professionals.
- Offer to assist in connecting them to the service.

AVAILABLE REFERRAL AND GBV-SPECIFIC SERVICES

- **Medical care:** Access to emergency healthcare, forensic examinations, or sexual and reproductive health services.
- **Legal aid:** Support with reporting incidents, navigating legal processes, or obtaining protection orders.
- **Safe shelters:** Temporary housing for survivors in unsafe living situations.
- **Psychosocial support:** Trauma-informed counseling and support groups for survivors.
- **Case management:** Holistic support to connect survivors to multiple services while ensuring their agency and confidentiality.

NON-GBV SERVICES:

- **Mental health services:** Access to psychologists, psychiatrists, or mental health counselors for therapy or medication management.
- **Social support:** Assistance with housing, food security, or employment for those in distress but not GBV-related.
- **Crisis hotlines:** Helplines for immediate emotional support or guidance on the next steps.
- **Community resources:** Peer support groups, recreational programs, or cultural organizations to foster belonging and resilience.

Understanding Referral Pathways:

Effective referrals depend on knowledge of the local referral pathways—networks of services and professionals that provide coordinated care.

Responders should:

- Familiarize themselves with available services in the area, including GBV-specific and non-GBV resources.
- Build relationships with service providers to ensure smooth and respectful referrals.

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- Keep updated lists of contacts, eligibility criteria, and procedures for accessing services.
 - Where possible and appropriate, seek feedback from survivors on their experiences with services to identify any gaps, concerns, or ineffective providers, for safe, supportive, and accountable care.

Referrals are a vital part of EFA, ensuring individuals receive the specialized care they need while maintaining a supportive and empowering approach.



EXAMPLE

After observing prolonged sadness and withdrawal in a community member, a field officer gently suggests, “It might help to speak with a counselor who specializes in these feelings. I can help connect you with someone who I trust can support you further”



Self-Care & Strategies

Practitioners must prioritize their own mental and emotional well-being to remain effective in delivering EFA.

Self-care helps prevent burnout and ensures sustained compassion.

Individual Strategies:

- Daily mindfulness practices like meditation or journaling.
- Engaging in hobbies or physical activities to decompress.
- Setting personal boundaries to avoid emotional overextension.

Collective Strategies Include:

- Peer support groups for sharing experiences.
- Regular workshops or training sessions on mental health and psychosocial support (MPHSS).
- Access to counseling services for practitioners.
- COFEM resources - Nourishing Feminist Souls: A Joyful Self-Care Toolkit



EXAMPLE

A feminist practitioner working with survivors of GBV/VAWG practices journaling after intense EFA sessions, reflecting on their emotions and identifying stressors. This helps them maintain emotional balance and continue supporting others effectively.



Grounding Technique

Grounding techniques are valuable tools for helping individuals experiencing heightened emotional distress reconnect with the present moment.

These techniques effectively reduce anxiety, promote calmness, and foster a sense of stability. Practitioners can use grounding techniques at any time to support themselves or others in reconnecting to their immediate surroundings. For feminist practitioners, grounding techniques not only support their own self-care but also equip them with practical skills to guide individuals in distress, making these techniques an essential resource in their practice.

5-4-3-2-1 Method:



Identify 5 things you **see** around you.

.....



Name 4 things you can **feel** (e.g., your clothing or the chair you're sitting on).

.....



Identify 3 things you **hear** (e.g., birds chirping or distant traffic).

.....



Note 2 things you **smell**.

.....



Recognize 1 thing you can **taste**.

.....

See [Annex 6](#) -Grounding exercise with trauma survivor, [Annex 7](#) -Breathing exercises for stress relief, [Annex 8](#) -Simple emotional freedom technique for rapid stress relief and [Annex 9](#)-Soothing butterfly hug for details.

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Reflection, Reflexivity, & Positionality

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Reflection involves looking back at actions and interactions to identify areas for improvement. Reflexivity goes deeper, challenging personal biases and assumptions that influence behavior. Positionality requires practitioners to examine how their social position, privileges, and lived experiences shape their interactions and decision-making.

Steps for Reflection:

- Document significant interactions, personal responses, and any observed power dynamics in a journal.
- Review these notes regularly to identify patterns and areas for improvement.
- Seek feedback from peers or mentors to gain new perspectives.

Steps for Reflexivity:

- Critically examine how your biases, assumptions, and lived experiences influence your decisions and interactions.
- Consider how your positionality affects power dynamics and relationships.
- Engage in ongoing learning and dialogue to challenge blind spots and deepen self-awareness.

Steps for Engaging with Positionality:

- Reflect on your social identities (e.g., gender, race, class), including accompanying privilege and discrimination.
- Recognize how your positionality shapes power dynamics, biases, and assumptions in interactions.
- Question how your values or social identities shape your approach to support. Recognize that there is no “standard” response, and commit to continuous learning from others’ experiences.
- Keep a journal and seek feedback to identify and address biases in your approach.
- Adjust interactions to be culturally sensitive, empowering, and non-judgmental.
- Regularly reassess your positionality and take accountability for learning and improving.

This approach ensures that your practice remains inclusive and responsive to those you serve.



EXAMPLE

A feminist practitioner reflects on an EFA session where they felt the urge to provide solutions instead of listening. Through journaling, they recognize this tendency, acknowledge how their positionality as a service provider may have contributed to this approach, and consciously practice active listening in future sessions.

See Annex 10 -Reflection and Reflexivity for details

Key Practical Tips:

1. Build trust through active listening and reflection.
2. Use non-verbal cues like SOLER to enhance engagement.
3. Manage internal distractions to stay present during conversations.
4. Avoid judgment, consoling, or offering advice prematurely.
5. Set clear boundaries to avoid role conflicts.
6. Refer individuals to professional services when necessary.
7. Prioritize self-care and collective care to maintain effectiveness.
8. Use grounding techniques to stabilize heightened emotions.
9. Embrace reflection and reflexivity to refine practices.
10. Allow and respect silence to encourage deeper sharing.

The development of this Emotional First Aid (EFA) Tipsheet was developed by Pupul Lama, Shahanoor Akter Chowdhury, and Meena C., in collaboration with Monira Rahman from the Innovation for Wellbeing Foundation and Pooja Nair from Mariwala Health Initiative, whose invaluable expertise and thoughtful guidance significantly shaped and enriched this resource.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Annex 1 - Active listening

Annex 2 - Listening barriers

Annex 3 - Attending Skill

Annex 4 - SOLER Strategy

Annex 5 - Grounding Techniques

Annex 6 - Grounding exercise with trauma survivor

Annex 7 - Breathing exercises for stress relief

Annex 8 - Simple Emotional Freedom Technique for Rapid Stress Relief

Annex 9 - Soothing Butterfly Hug

Annex 10 - Reflection and Reflexivity

Annex 11 - Trauma-informed or Trauma-denied Principles and
Implementation of Trauma-informed Services for Women

Annex 12 - PFA for responders of VAWG survivors

Annex 13 - Psychological First Aid Guide for Field Workers

Annex 14 - UN Women “How To Support Survivors Of Gbv When A Gbv
Actor Is Not Available In Your Area”

Annex 15 - Learning Brief “Feminist Approaches to Specialized Mental Health
Care for Survivors of GBV”