

Doria Feminist Fund MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT DURING CRISIS

A Practical Guide for Wellbeing

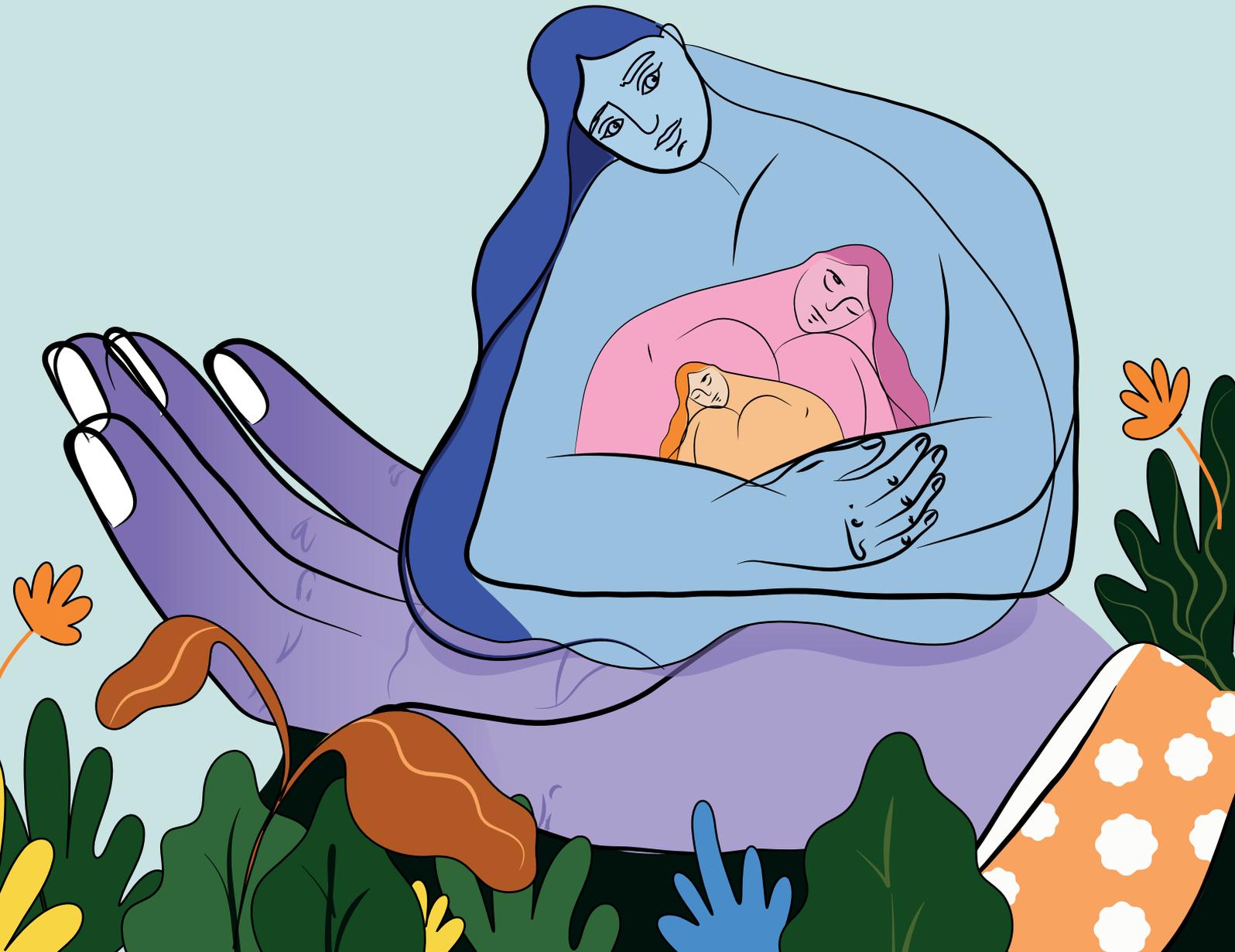


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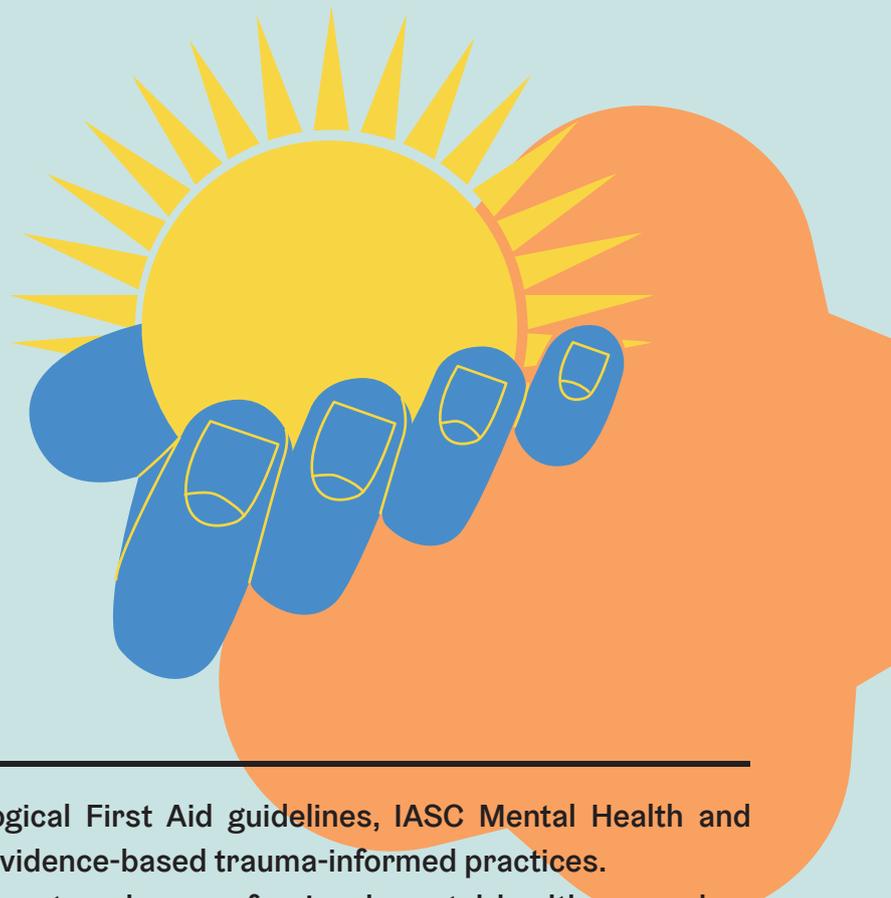
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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide offers practical mental health support for people experiencing crisis, conflict, or displacement. It provides concrete tools you can use immediately to manage stress, anxiety, and trauma responses. Whether you're sheltering in place, displaced, or supporting others, these techniques are designed to be accessible anywhere, anytime.

What you'll find here:

- Understanding your body's stress responses
- Daily self-care basics
- Three practical techniques you can use immediately
- Guidance for caring for children
- When and how to seek professional help



This guide is based on WHO Psychological First Aid guidelines, IASC Mental Health and Psychosocial Support framework, and evidence-based trauma-informed practices. It provides immediate support. It does not replace professional mental health care when needed.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR REACTIONS

When we experience crisis—war, displacement, ongoing danger—our bodies and minds respond in ways designed to protect us. These responses are your system trying to cope with overwhelming circumstances.

PHYSICAL SIGNS

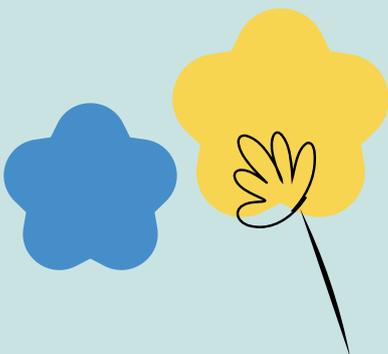
Your body often registers stress first:

- Sleep disruption (insomnia, nightmares, sleeping too much)
- Constant exhaustion despite rest
- Headaches, stomach problems, muscle tension
- Racing heart or difficulty breathing
- Changes in appetite (eating more or less)
- Getting sick more frequently

EMOTIONAL CHANGES

Your emotional landscape shifts under stress:

- Mood swings or emotional numbness
- Increased irritability or sudden anger
- Feeling hopeless or disconnected
- Crying more easily, or unable to cry
- Difficulty trusting or connecting with others
- Persistent anxiety or fear
- Changes in appetite (eating more or less)
- Getting sick more frequently



MENTAL SIGNS

Crisis changes how your brain functions:

- Concentration problems — Reading the same sentence repeatedly, trouble following conversations
- Decision fatigue — Even simple choices feel overwhelming
- Racing thoughts — Mind won't settle
- Intrusive memories — Can't stop replaying events
- Memory changes — Forgetting routine things or remembering too vividly
- Future feels impossible — Can't plan or imagine tomorrow

Remember: All of these are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Your reactions make sense given what you're experiencing.



DAILY BASICS

Before any specific technique, your body needs basic maintenance. These considerations are essential for functioning during crisis.

FOOD & WATER

Why it matters:

Stress depletes your body faster. Low blood sugar increases anxiety.

What to do:

- Eat at regular times even if not hungry
- Simple food is fine—bread, rice, whatever's available
- Don't skip meals
- Keep water nearby and sip throughout the day



SLEEP & REST

Why it matters:

Your brain processes stress during rest. Without it, everything compounds.

What to do:

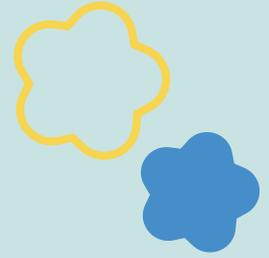
- Go to bed at roughly the same time
- Put phone across the room, not next to bed
- If you can't sleep, rest anyway—lying with closed eyes helps
- Take brief rest breaks during the day



MOVEMENT

Why it matters:

Your body holds stress physically. Movement helps release it.



What to do:

- Stretch when you wake—reach overhead, roll shoulders
- Walk when safe
- Simple movement counts—no formal exercise needed
- Shake out hands, gently roll neck

INFORMATION BOUNDARIES

Why it matters:

Constant exposure to distressing news keeps your nervous system activated.

What to do:

- Check news at set times only (morning/evening)
- Turn off all notifications
- Avoid screens 1 hour before bed
- Notice compulsive checking—set timer, then put phone away

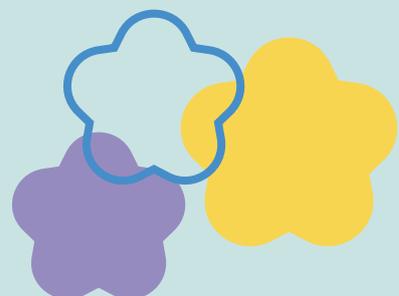
CONNECTION

Why it matters:

Humans regulate through relationship. Isolation makes everything worse.

What to do:

- Talk to someone, even briefly
- Share what you're experiencing
- Sit near others when possible
- Help someone else when you can



PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

These tools directly affect your nervous system. Use them when you need them.

TECHNIQUE 1: BOX BREATHING

Takes: 2 minutes

Use when: Anxiety, panic, can't sleep, feeling overwhelmed
What it does: Slows heart rate, signals safety to your body

HOW TO DO IT:

1. Breathe IN through nose → count to 4
2. HOLD → count to 4
3. Breathe OUT through mouth → count to 4
4. HOLD empty → count to 4
5. REPEAT 5 times

Tip: If 4 counts feels too long, use 3. If too short, use 5. Find your rhythm.

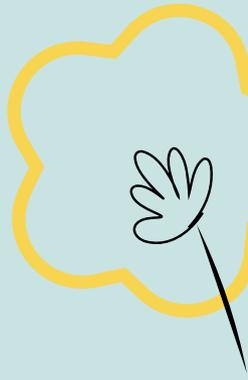
When to use:

- Before difficult conversations
- When waking anxious
- After bad news
- Middle of the night when can't sleep
- Before important decisions



TECHNIQUE 2:

5-4-3-2-1 GROUNDING



Takes: 5 minutes

Use when: Panic attacks, flashbacks, feeling disconnected, overwhelming memories
What it does: Interrupts panic by engaging your senses with present moment

HOW TO DO IT:

Keep your eyes open. Look around slowly.

- 5 THINGS YOU SEE Name them specifically: "blue chair," "door," "light," "shoes," "water bottle" Really look at each one
- 4 THINGS YOU TOUCH Notice sensations: feet on ground, clothes on skin, air on face, chair beneath you Actually touch them if you can
- 3 THINGS YOU HEAR Listen carefully: traffic, voices, breathing, wind Include distant and close sounds
- 2 THINGS YOU SMELL Notice scents around you If you can't smell anything, remember two smells you like
- 1 THING YOU TASTE Notice taste in your mouth Or remember a taste you enjoy

Finish: Take three deep breaths. Notice how you feel compared to when you started.

TECHNIQUE 3: BODY SCAN

Takes: 10 minutes

Use when: Physical tension, stress, before sleep, chronic tightness

What it does: Releases held tension by systematically tensing and relaxing muscles

HOW TO DO IT:

Find quiet place. Sit or lie down. Close eyes if safe.

Move through your body from feet to head:

FEET	Curl toes tight → Hold 5 seconds → Release
CALVES	Point toes toward head → Hold → Release
THIGHS	Squeeze muscles → Hold → Release
STOMACH	Pull tight → Hold → Let go soft
HANDS	Make fists → Hold → Stretch fingers → Relax
ARMS	Bend elbows, tense → Hold → Drop heavy
SHOULDERS	Pull up to ears → Hold → Drop down
FACE	Scrunch everything tight → Hold → Release soft

Finish: Three deep breaths. Notice how your body feels now.



GROUP SUPPORT CIRCLE

15 - 20 minutes

For families, shelters, or groups facing crisis together:

SETUP:

1. Sit together (5-10 people)
2. Three breaths together
3. Explain: We'll share briefly, listen without advice, keep it private

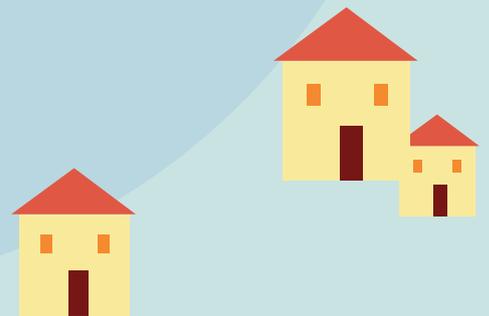
SHARING:

- Each person shares: "One word for how I feel" or "One thing I need"
- Just listen—no fixing, no interrupting
- Passing is okay
- Emotion is okay

CLOSING:

- Three breaths together
- Reminder: what's shared stays private

The power is in being heard and hearing others.



IF YOU'RE IN A SHELTER

Living in crowded conditions requires specific strategies:

Create small routines — Morning stretch, evening breathing

Find 1-2 people for mutual check-ins

Communicate needs to staff—don't suffer silently

Use 5-4-3-2-1 when crowding feels overwhelming

Take breaks from people—step outside for air when possible

IF YOU HAVE CHILDREN

Children need you present, not perfect. They're watching how you cope.

WHAT TO SAY

Be honest in simple terms:

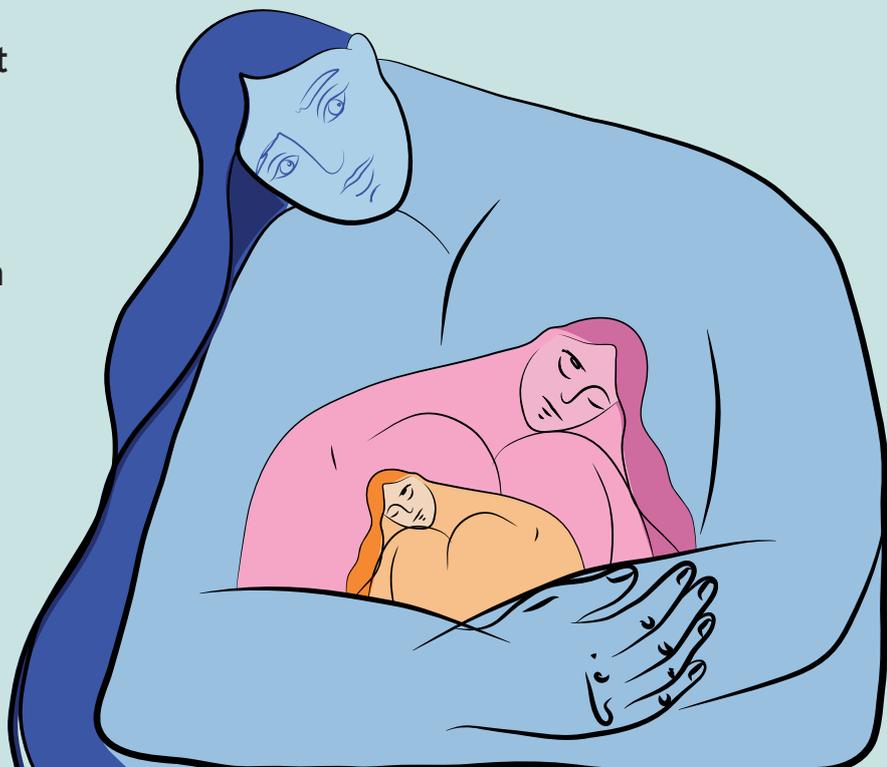
- "I don't know when we can go home, but we're safe right now"
- "This is happening because of decisions grown-ups made"
- "It's not your fault"
- "I'm scared sometimes too, but we're together"

WHAT THEY NEED ROUTINE

- Same bedtime when possible
- Regular meals
- Small predictable rituals PERMISSION TO FEEL
- "It's okay to be scared/sad/angry"
- "It's okay to play and laugh too" PLAY
- Let them draw, play games, run when safe
- Play is how they process—not ignoring the crisis

WHAT YOU NEED

Take care of yourself. You can't help them if you're depleted. When you practice breathing, they learn. When you rest, you teach them rest matters.



DAILY PRACTICE CHECKLIST

MORNING

- Three deep breaths before checking phone
- Drink water
- Stretch arms and shoulders

DURING DAY

- Use 5-4-3-2-1 when stressed
- Take short breaks
- Check in: what does my body need?

EVENING

- Put phone away 1 hour before sleep
- Gentle stretches
- Breathing practice

WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

SEEK MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IF YOU HAVE:

- Thoughts of harming yourself or others
- Can't care for yourself or children
- Panic you can't manage with these techniques
- Haven't slept in several days
- Fear that won't decrease over time
- Constant flashbacks/nightmares interfering with life
- Using alcohol/substances to cope



TYPES OF SUPPORT:

PROFESSIONAL	WHAT THEY OFFER
COUNSELORS	Help with daily challenges, practical
THERAPISTS PSYCHOLOGISTS	Deeper support to process experiences, understand patterns
PSYCHIATRISTS	Medical doctors who can prescribe medication