

# YOUTH VOLUNTEER GUIDE

## ON DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE



Supported by



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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# CONTENT

|                                                                   |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgement                                                   | I  |
| Writing and Editorial Team                                        | II |
| Introduction                                                      | 1  |
| How to Use This Guide                                             | 2  |
| Chapter 01 : Introduction to the Disaster Context                 | 4  |
| Chapter 02: Volunteer & Community Engagement                      | 21 |
| Chapter 03: Child Protection and Safeguarding in Disaster Context | 25 |
| Chapter 04: Psychological First Aid                               | 43 |
| Reference                                                         | 72 |

# INTRODUCTION

With increasing exposure to climate-induced natural disasters, Sri Lanka has become more vulnerable than ever. Floods, landslides, droughts, and extreme weather events continue to affect communities across the island.

During such times, many young people step forward to volunteer, reflecting the strong culture of solidarity and collective responsibility that is deeply rooted in Sri Lankan society. However, without proper knowledge and preparation, even well-intentioned volunteer efforts can sometimes overlook important safety, psychosocial, and safeguarding considerations.

**‘Resurge – Healing Communities’** was initiated by a dedicated group of young undergraduates who were trained as Youth Climate Ambassadors by the British Council Sri Lanka in collaboration with the Earth Lanka Youth Network. Recognizing the need for better guidance for volunteers, they developed this structured and evidence-informed Volunteer Guide to promote safe, ethical, and psychologically informed engagement in disaster preparedness and response.



# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



## **Start where you need.**



You don't have to read the guide from beginning to end. Jump to the chapter that best fits what you want to do as a volunteer.



## **Learn together.**



This guide can be used individually or with your volunteer team. Discuss ideas, plan activities together, and share what you learn.



## **Turn ideas into action.**



Use the chapters as inspiration to design activities, awareness programmes, or support initiatives in your community.



## **Reflect and adapt.**



Every community and disaster situation is different. Use the guidance here, but always adapt your approach to the needs of the people you are supporting.



## **Keep learning.**

This guide is a starting point. Continue learning about disaster preparedness, safeguarding and psychosocial support to become a more effective volunteer.

# YOUR GUIDE TO GETTING STARTED.

This guide is organized into four chapters. Depending on what you are looking for, you can explore the sections that are most relevant to you.

? Want a quick snapshot of the disaster context in Sri Lanka?

## **Read Chapter 01**

Tip: Understanding the context helps you volunteer more responsibly.

? Have an idea to plan an activity with your volunteer team on disaster preparedness or disaster response?

## **Read Chapter 02**

Tip: Good planning turns ideas into meaningful action. Use this chapter to turn your motivation into meaningful and safe volunteer initiatives.

? Planning to organize activities or work with children in affected communities?

## **Read Chapter 03**

Tip: Planning activities for children may seem simple—but doing it the right way is important for their safety and well-being.

? Want to support affected communities through Psychological First Aid?

## **Read Chapter 04**

Tip: You don't have to be a mental health professional to provide Psychological First Aid. With the right understanding and basic training, anyone can offer Psychological First Aid.



# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction to the Disaster Context



## 1.1 Introduction

Sri Lanka faces a wide range of natural and human-caused hazards. Seasonal floods, landslides, droughts, cyclones, coastal storms, and heat stress affect many districts each year. Disease outbreaks and environmental degradation also pose risks. These hazards become disasters when they disrupt daily life and overwhelm the ability of communities to cope.

Global and national frameworks guide disaster risk reduction and response in Sri Lanka. The **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030)** encourages countries to move beyond reacting to disasters and instead focus on reducing risks and strengthening resilience. In Sri Lanka, the **Disaster Management Act No. 13 of 2005** established the national disaster management system led by the Disaster Management Centre. National plans such as the **National Disaster Management Plan** and the **National Emergency Operation Plan** guide how government agencies, communities, and partners work together during emergencies. Youth volunteers operate within this system. Their actions should support local authorities, follow safety guidance, and reflect ethical practice.

By understanding hazards, vulnerabilities, and community capacities, youth volunteers can contribute in ways that are safe, practical, and trusted.

### 1.1.1 The Difference of Hazard and Disaster

#### Hazard:

Hazard is a potential danger — something that ***could cause harm*** to people, property, or the environment.

#### Disaster:

A disaster happens when that hazard ***actually affects people and overwhelms their ability to cope.***

**Example 1: Flood**

- » **Hazard:** Heavy rainfall and rising river water.
- » **Disaster:** The river overflows, homes are flooded, people are displaced, and emergency help is needed.

**Example 2: Landslide**

- » **Hazard:** Unstable soil on a steep hill after days of rain.
- » **Disaster:** The hill collapses, destroying houses and blocking roads.

**Example 3: Coastal Storm**

- » **Hazard:** Strong winds and high sea waves.
- » **Disaster:** Boats are destroyed, houses near the coast are damaged, and people must evacuate.



*A hazard is a potential threat; A disaster is what happens when that threat actually causes serious damage and people cannot cope on their own.*



### 1.1.2 Common Hazards and Disasters in Sri Lanka

As a volunteer, it is important to recognize **hazards** in your environment. Hazards are potential threats that can lead to disasters if they affect people and communities.

By being aware of these risks, volunteers can early awareness, preparedness, and safe support response when needed.

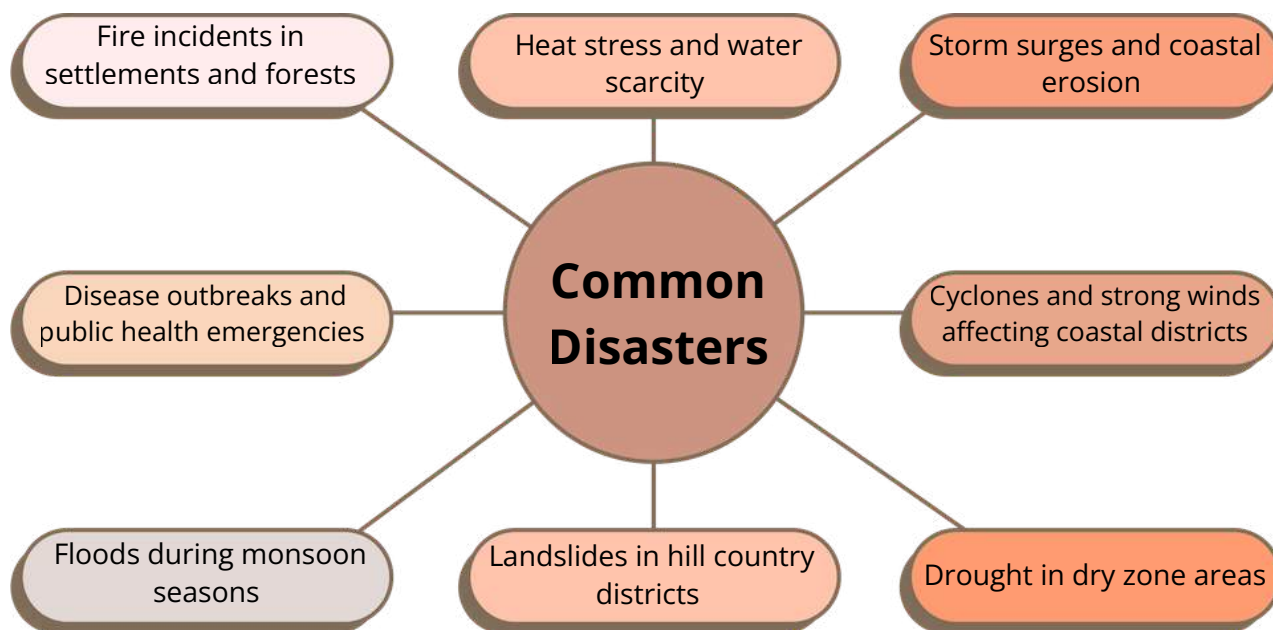
### 1.1.2.1 Common Hazards in Sri Lanka

These are conditions or events that **have the potential to cause harm**.

- Heavy rainfall during monsoon seasons
- Unstable slopes in hill country areas
- Long periods without rainfall in dry zone regions
- Strong winds and tropical weather systems in coastal areas
- High sea waves and rising sea levels
- Extremely high temperatures and prolonged heat
- Unsafe electrical connections and flammable materials in settlements
- Poor sanitation or environmental conditions that may spread diseases

### 1.1.2.2 Common Disasters in Sri Lanka

These disasters occur when hazards **severely affect communities and disrupt normal life**.



**Tip for Volunteers:** Not every hazard becomes a disaster. When communities are prepared and risks are managed early, the impact can often be reduced.

## 1.2 The Disaster Context in Sri Lanka

### 1.2.1 Underlying risk factors

- Settlements in flood plains and steep slopes
- Poverty and limited access to services.
- Environmental degradation and deforestation
- Inadequate drainage and waste management
- Climate variability and extreme weather
- Limited access to early warning information

### 1.2.2 Monsoon seasons

Sri Lanka's disaster risk is closely linked to its two main monsoon seasons. These monsoon patterns are generally predictable and play a key role in disaster preparedness:

#### Southwest Monsoon

- » May–September
- » Often causes heavy rainfall and flooding in the Western and Southern provinces.

#### Northeast Monsoon

- » December–February
- » Affect the Northern and Eastern regions and may bring floods and cyclonic conditions.

### 1.2.3 Geographic Vulnerability

Different regions face different levels of risk in terms of geographic vulnerability can and Understanding local geography helps identify communities at higher risk.

### Western and Southern provinces

- High risk of flooding ,especially in urban areas

### Central Highlands

- Highly prone to landslides

### Northern and Eastern coastal areas

- Vulnerable to cyclones and coastal hazards



## 1.2.4 Urban and Rural Differences

Disaster impacts vary between settings:

### Urban areas (e.g., Colombo)

- Face challenges such as overcrowding, drainage failures, and infrastructure strain.

### Rural, estate, and remote communities

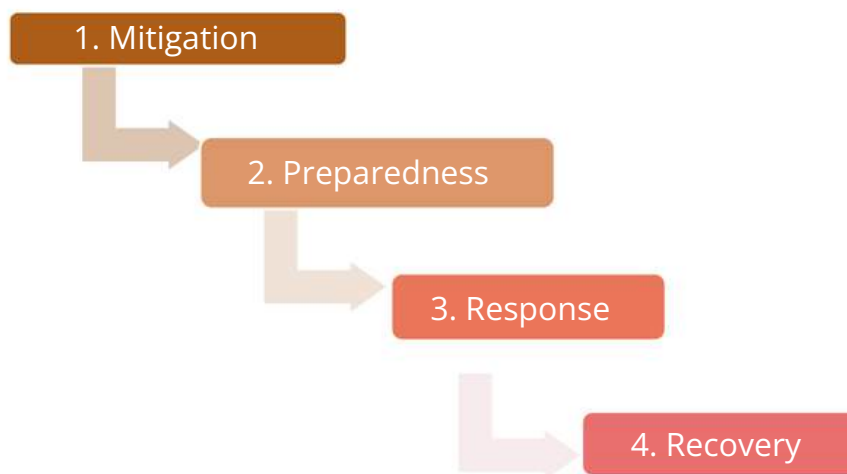
- Often experience limited access to services, delayed response, and severe livelihood disruptions.

## 1.2.5 Climate Change and Emerging Risks

Climate change is intensifying disaster risks in Sri Lanka. Increasingly irregular rainfall, extended droughts, rising temperatures, and more frequent extreme weather events are accelerating the impact of disasters and increasing community vulnerability. As volunteers, understanding these climate-related changes is essential for you to plan and support effective disaster preparedness, response, and long-term resilience building.

## 1.3 Stages of Disaster Management

Disaster management has four stages. As volunteers, you may be involved in all four, but in different ways.



### Stage 01: Mitigation

This stage includes long-term actions taken to reduce the impact of disasters before they occur. The aim is to lower risks and prevent damage as far as possible. Typical activities include:

- Identifying hazard-prone areas such as flood plains and landslide zones
- Strengthening buildings and infrastructure to withstand hazard
- Protecting natural barriers such as mangroves and forests
- Land-use planning and safe construction standards Public policies that reduce disaster risks

Organizations such as the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) support mitigation through risk mapping and planning.

## Stage 02: Preparedness

This stage involves planning and training to ensure an effective response when a disaster occurs. It focuses on readiness and coordination. Typical activities include:

- Training responders and volunteers
- Conducting disaster drills and simulations
- Early warning systems
- Stockpiling emergency supplies
- Public awareness programmes

Preparedness helps communities respond quickly and safely during emergencies.

## Stage 03: Response

This stage includes the immediate actions taken during and just after a disaster to save lives and meet basic needs. Typical activities include:

- Search and rescue operations
- Emergency medical assistance
- Evacuation and shelter support
- Distribution of food and water
- Providing temporary shelter
- Coordinating relief services

Emergency services and humanitarian agencies focus mainly on this stage.

## Stage 04: Recovery

**Recovery** involves restoring normal life after the immediate emergency has passed. It includes both short-term and long-term efforts. Typical activities include:

- Repairing damaged homes and infrastructure
- Restoring water and electricity services
- Supporting livelihoods and income generation
- Providing psychosocial support by rebuilding schools and hospitals
- Improving systems to reduce future risks

Recovery often includes rebuilding in safer ways to reduce future disaster impacts.



## 1.4. Impact of Disasters on People

As volunteers you need to understand how disasters affect people so that you can plan your interventions based on your capacity, resources and the need on the ground:



### 1.4.1 Physical Impact

- Injury, illness, disability
- Loss of shelter, food, water, and basic services
- Physical exhaustion and fatigue caused by lack of sleep and prolonged “survival mode” activities during and after disasters

## 1.4.2 Behavioral and Somatic Impact

- Headaches, stomachaches, chest pain, or rapid heartbeat without a medical cause
- Expressions of anxiety and anger because they might feel angry at the situation, at authorities, or even at themselves (survivor's guilt)
- In children bedwetting, thumb-sucking, or extreme "clinginess" to caregivers
- Changes in appetite, sleep disturbances, or an increase in the use of tobacco/alcohol/drugs to cope

## 1.4.3 Psychological & Emotional Impact

- Shock, fear, confusion, emotional numbness
- Difficulty concentrating, confusion, unable to make simple decisions
- Sense of loss - Grief for loved ones
- "Solastagia" by loss of physical things
- Trauma Reactions (flashbacks, nightmares, and being "hyper-alert")

## 1.4.4 Social Impact

- Disruption of "Normalcy" (schools and workplaces closing, which removes the daily routines)
- Broken networks (separation from family, neighbors, and support systems)
- Increased vulnerability of children, elderly, and marginalized groups
- Increased risk of conflict within families or communities (social tension)
- Loss of identity

**Remember:** These reactions are **normal responses to abnormal situations**.

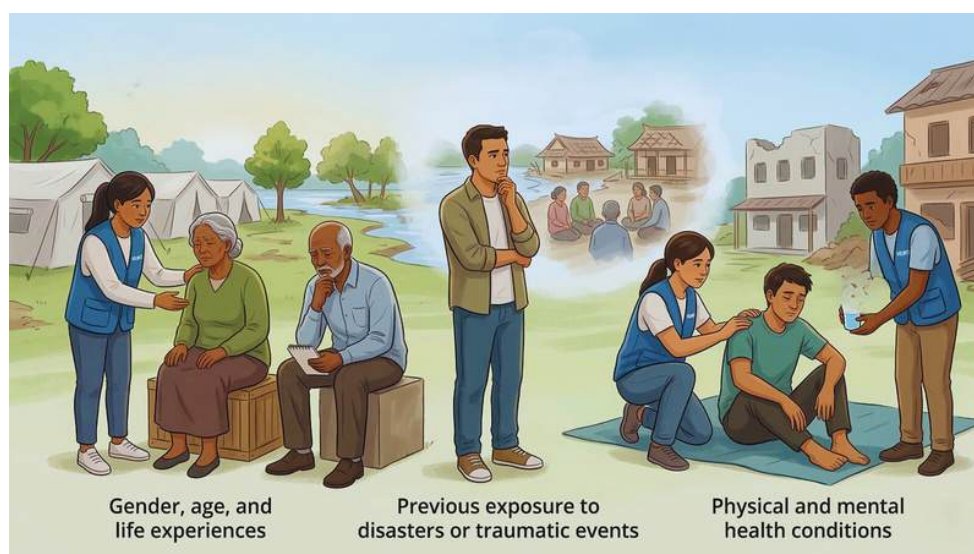
## 1.5. Understanding Reactions to Disasters

As a volunteer, it is important to understand that people react to disasters in different ways. Their reactions may depend on several personal and social factors. Being aware of these differences helps volunteers respond with empathy, patience, and respect.

Some factors that influence how people react include:

- Gender, age, and life experiences
- Previous exposure to disasters or traumatic events
- Physical and mental health conditions

The following chapters will explore these aspects further and provide guidance on how volunteers can support people in sensitive and appropriate ways.



## 1.6. National Disaster Management Framework

Understanding the national disaster management framework is also important for volunteers. It helps you see how disaster preparedness, response, and recovery are organized in Sri Lanka, and where your volunteer efforts can best contribute.

For your convenience, we have listed a few key national plans and frameworks currently in place (as of March 2026). You can refer to them to understand the broader system and identify how your volunteer activities can align with national efforts.

### 1.6.1 Legal and institutional framework

In Sri Lanka the Disaster Administration operates through a centralized multi-level coordination system from national to provincial to district to divisional to village level

- Disaster Management Act No. 13 of 2005
- National Council for Disaster Management
- Disaster Management Centre as the coordinating body
- District and divisional disaster management committees
- Grama Niladhari divisions and community-level structures



### 1.6.2 Lead institutions National level are:

- National Council for Disaster Management
- Disaster Management Center
- Department of Meteorology National
- Building Research Organization
- Irrigation Department



### 1.6.3 Provincial & District Level

- District Secretary act as the Disaster coordinator
- District Disaster Management
- Unit District level emergency committees

### 1.6.4 Divisional and Local Level

- Divisional level coordinates the local level response
- Grama Niladari supports identifying affected households
- Local Councils (Municipal councils, Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Saba manageshelters, sanitation and waste

### 1.6.5 Key National Plans

- National Disaster Management Plan
- National Emergency Operation Plan
- Sri Lanka Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme
- Climate Change Adaptation Plans
- School Safety and Safe Hospitals programmes

### 1.6.6 Role of local authorities

- Early warning dissemination
- Evacuation coordination
- Relief distribution
- Temporary shelter management
- Recovery planning

### 1.6.7 Disaster Response Hotline Numbers

As a volunteer, you can help spread awareness of these important hotline numbers through different communication channels such as community meetings, social media, and awareness campaigns.

These numbers can help people quickly reach the relevant authorities during emergencies. When volunteer opportunities are announced, you may also be able to support institutions such as the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) by assisting with hotline calls or coordinating information.

Sharing the right information at the right time can help communities respond faster and stay safer during disasters.

|      |                                               |
|------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 117  | •Disaster Management Centre (24-hour hotline) |
| 119  | •Police Emergency                             |
| 118  | •National Help Desk                           |
| 1990 | •Suwa Seriya Ambulance Service                |
| 110  | •Fire and Rescue Service                      |
| 116  | •Air Force Rescue                             |

## 1.7. Global Frameworks Guiding Action

Several global frameworks guide how countries, organizations, and communities reduce disaster risks and respond to emergencies. As a youth volunteer, understanding these frameworks can help you plan your activities in ways that align with global good practices.

### 1.7.1 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction – Key Priorities

The **Sendai Framework (2015–2030)** provides global guidance on reducing disaster risks and strengthening resilience. Its four priorities are:

1. Understand disaster risk
2. Strengthen disaster risk governance
3. Invest in disaster risk reduction
4. Enhance preparedness for effective response and recovery

### 1.7.2 UNDRR Guidance for Communities

The **United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)** encourages communities to:

- Promote risk-informed planning
- Ensure inclusive participation in decision-making
- Protect vulnerable groups
- Integrate local knowledge and community experience
- Build resilience through education and training

### **1.7.3 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Key Priorities**

The **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** highlights several priorities that are relevant to disaster risk reduction:

- Reduce exposure and vulnerability of communities
- Address informal settlements in high-risk areas
- Strengthen climate-resilient livelihoods
- Promote international cooperation and technology sharing
- Strengthen multi-sector coordination systems
- Improve monitoring of climate hazards
- Develop multi-hazard early warning systems

### **1.7.4 Priorities under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**

The **UNFCCC** focuses on addressing climate-related risks and strengthening resilience through:

- Identifying vulnerable sectors and communities
- Improving understanding of slow-onset climate events (such as sea-level rise or drought)
- Promoting adaptation and preparedness planning
- Supporting community-based climate adaptation
- Reporting progress on resilience-building with transparency
- Addressing loss and damage caused by climate impacts

## CHAPTER 2

# Volunteer and Community Engagement



## 2.1 Introduction

Young people are not only affected by climate change and disasters—they are also powerful agents of change. Across Sri Lanka, youth volunteers play an important role in helping communities become safer, stronger, and more resilient.

Youth engagement is especially valuable in raising awareness, supporting early warning systems, assisting vulnerable groups, and promoting preparedness within communities. As a youth volunteer, your role is to support — not replace — official disaster management structures. Working together with community leaders, local authorities, and disaster management agencies helps ensure that volunteer efforts are safe, coordinated, and effective.

This chapter explores how youth volunteers can engage with communities before, during, and after disasters. It provides practical guidance on planning volunteer activities, working ethically and safely, and supporting community preparedness and response.

To help connect these ideas to real situations, the chapter also includes case studies from Cyclone Ditwah (2025), highlighting how volunteers supported communities during disaster response in Sri Lanka.

## 2.2 Your Role in the Disaster Cycle

### 2.2.1 Mitigation

You can;

- Conduct community discussions on climate change impacts
- Support awareness sessions using guidance from National Building Research Organization (NBRO)

Encourage families to follow safe building and environment care advice given by the NBRO such as;

- Avoid cutting slopes
- Do not disturb natural soil
- Design buildings to fit the slope
- Clear drains before monsoons and direct water away from slopes
- Watch for cracks in walls/floors, tilting trees or poles, new water springs on slopes
- Obtain structural designs from qualified engineers
- Obtain mandatory technical approvals for building permits

- » Help vulnerable households understand warning colour codes given by the NBRO
- » Assist elderly residents to register for SMS alerts
- » Identify flood-prone areas/roads using publicly available data from the Irrigation department
- » Map landslide-risk households using publicly available NBRO data
- » Identify isolated elderly or vulnerable families
- » Map unsafe drainage or blocked waterways
- » Run social media campaigns on preparedness
- » Promote environmental protection activities such as;

- Tree planting with native species
- River bank protection activities
- Mangrove restoration in coastal areas
- Clean-up campaigns to prevent drainage blockage
- Awareness on reducing plastic waste

This information can be shared with the Grama Niladhari, Divisional Secretariat, and Local disaster committees.

## 2.2.2 Before a Disaster - Preparedness

as a youth volunteer, you can:

- Assist in relaying weather warnings through megaphone, Siren or PA systems, hoisting danger/red flags
- Conduct community awareness sessions (e.g. screen films or distribute attractive posters/leaflets on disasters)
- Help families prepare emergency kits (See Figure 2.1)
- Assist with evacuation drills in schools and villages (See Figure 2.2)
- Help maintain evacuation plans
- Support community risk mapping (e.g. : helping identify households in landslide-prone areas who need evacuation)



### Note:

*You can encourage families to prepare a basic 72-hour emergency kit, especially in flood, landslide, cyclone, or drought-prone areas. Instruct families to store the kit in an easily accessible location and check the contents from time to time.*



**Please note:** This list isn't exhaustive but gives an idea of a basic 72-hour kit. You can also use it to help communities prepare their own kits.



### Food & Water

- Drinking water (at least 3 litres per person per day for 3 days)
- Dry rations (biscuits, canned food, dhal, rice packets)
- Baby food (if applicable)
- Manual can opener
- Reusable plates and cups



### Important Documents

(Keep copies in a waterproof pouch)

- National Identity Card (NIC)
- Birth certificates
- Land deeds
- Insurance documents
- Bank passbooks
- Medical records
- Emergency contact numbers



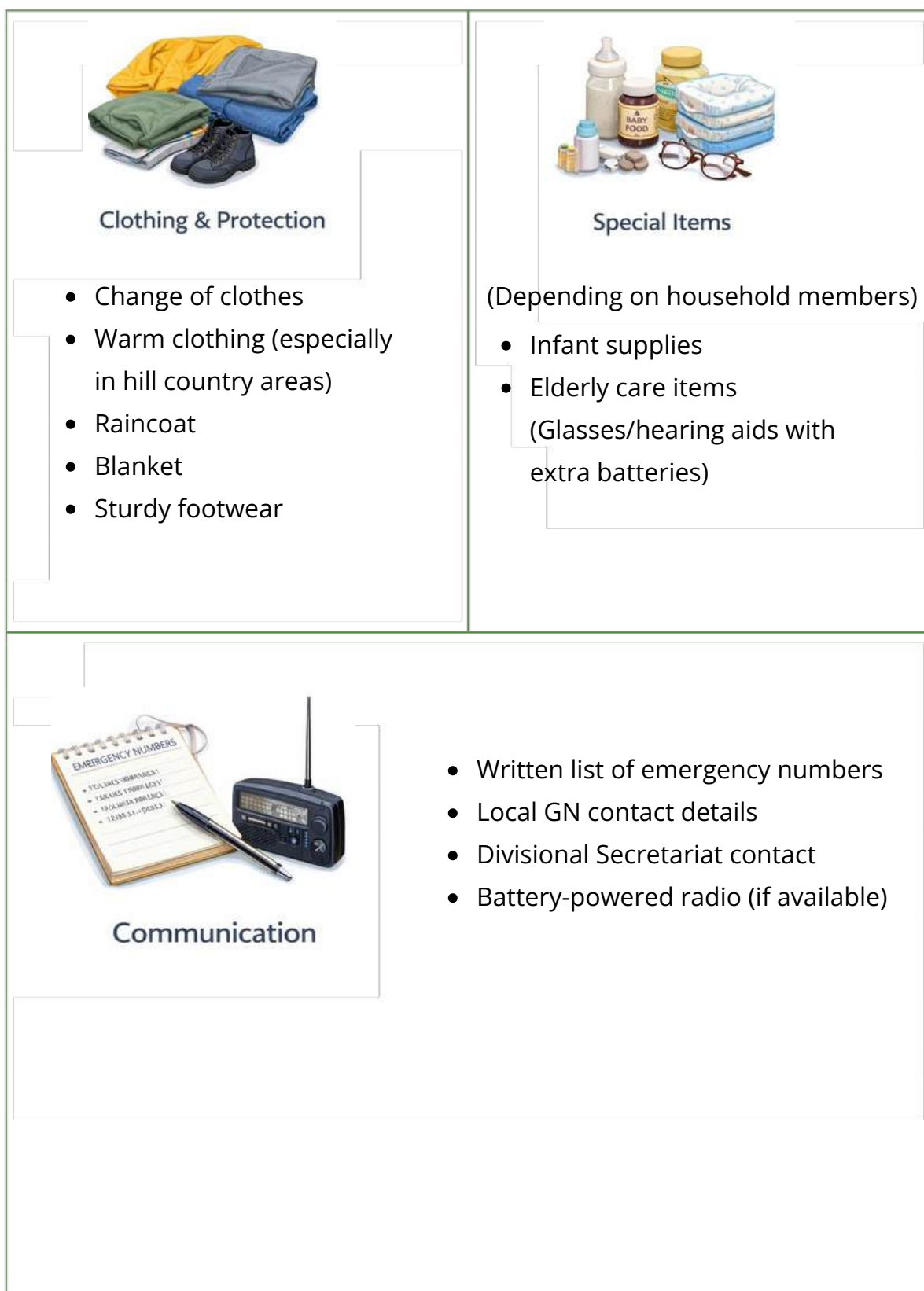
### First Aid & Health Items

- Basic first aid kit
- Prescribed medication (minimum 3-7 days supply)
- Pain relievers
- Oral rehydration salts (ORS)
- Sanitary pads
- Soap and hand sanitizer
- Face masks



### Safety & Lighting

- Torch/flashlight
- Extra batteries
- Power bank (fully charged)
- Whistle (to signal for help)
- Multipurpose knife
- Matches/lighter/candles (in waterproof container)



*Figure 2.1 - Basic Emergency Kit Checklist*

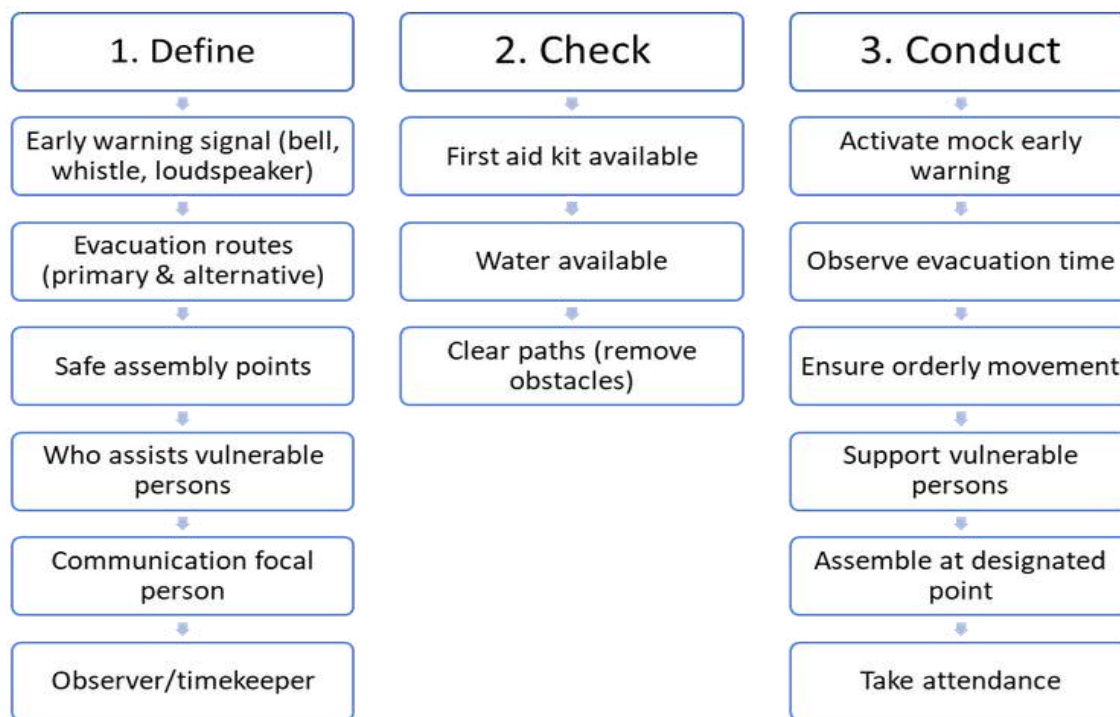


Figure 2.2. - General Guidelines on Conducting Evacuation Drills

### 2.2.3 During a Disaster - Response

**Your role is supportive, not frontline rescue.**

**You MAY:**

- Follow instructions from authorities
- Help with communication and coordination
- Assist in evacuation centre organization according to "Sphere Standards" (See Figure 2.3)
- Help register affected families
- Identify urgent needs and report safely
- Support relief distribution
- Help identify elderly or persons with disabilities needing assistance
- Maintain orderly queues respectfully

## Running a Community Kitchen

Community kitchens can play an important role during disaster response by providing warm meals to affected families, volunteers, and frontline responders. However, they require careful planning to ensure food is prepared safely, efficiently, and without waste.

Before starting a community kitchen, volunteers should consider the following:



- **Understand the need first** – Confirm how many people need meals and how many meals are required per day.
- **Plan quantities carefully** – Know the quantity of food required before cooking to avoid shortages or unnecessary waste.
- **Coordinate the receiving destination** – Ensure there is a confirmed location or community ready to receive the food before cooking begins.
- **Arrange transportation in advance** – Plan how meals will be safely transported to the destination while they are still fresh.
- **Organize manpower** – Assign volunteers for cooking, packaging, transportation, and distribution.
- **Maintain a basic inventory** – Keep track of ingredients, cooking supplies, and quantities used to ensure accountability and planning for the next round of cooking.
- **Follow food safety practices** – Ensure proper handwashing, clean utensils, and safe food preparation areas.
- **Use safe packaging** – Pack meals in clean, secure containers to avoid contamination during transport.
- **Plan distribution carefully** – Coordinate with local authorities or community leaders to ensure fair and orderly distribution.

- **Avoid duplication** – Check whether other groups are already providing meals in the same location.
- **Label all food containers and meal boxes clearly** – Write what the container or box contains and the quantity (e.g., “Rice – 10 kg” or “Cooked meal packs – 50”) to avoid confusion during cooking, packing, and distribution.
- **Label the destination when possible** – If meals are being sent to different locations, mark the boxes with the name of the village, camp, or receiving center to make distribution easier.
- **Check expiry dates** – Ensure all ingredients are safe and within their usable dates before cooking.
- **Plan a simple menu** – Choose meals that are nutritious, easy to cook in large quantities, and culturally familiar.
- **Separate raw and cooked food** – This helps prevent contamination and maintains food safety.
- **Ensure safe drinking water is used** – Cooking and cleaning should always be done using safe water sources.
- **Assign a person to manage supplies** – One volunteer should track ingredients used and remaining stock.
- **Use clean preparation areas** – Keep cooking surfaces and utensils clean throughout the process.
- **Manage waste properly** – Dispose of food waste and packaging safely to maintain hygiene in the cooking area.
- **Avoid overcooking large quantities too early** – Cook in batches when possible to keep meals fresh.
- **Record the number of meals distributed** – This helps plan future cooking quantities.

Community kitchens work best when they are organized, coordinated, and mindful of food safety and community needs.

## Organizing a Donation Drive

Donation drives can help mobilize resources quickly during emergencies. However, collecting items without clear planning can lead to waste, storage challenges, or sending unnecessary items to affected communities.

When organizing a donation drive, volunteers should consider the following:

- **Define what you are collecting** – Clearly communicate the specific items needed (e.g., dry rations, hygiene items, blankets) instead of collecting everything.
- **Coordinate with receiving communities** – Confirm the needs of affected communities or relief centers before collecting items.
- **Set quality standards** – Encourage donors to provide new or usable items only. Avoid damaged or expired goods.
- **Maintain an inventory** – Keep records of items received, quantities, and distribution details.
- **Sort items early** – Separate items by category to make packing and distribution easier.
- **Store donations properly** – Use clean, dry, and secure spaces to avoid damage or contamination.
- **Plan transportation and distribution** – Identify where the donations will be sent and arrange logistics in advance.
- **Avoid collecting items without a clear destination** – Unplanned donations can create unnecessary storage burdens.
- **Communicate transparently** – Keep donors informed about how their contributions are being used.



- **Sort donations by category** – For example: food, clothing, hygiene items, baby items, and medical supplies.
- **Separate new and used items** – Ensure only usable items are sent to affected communities.
- **Avoid sending inappropriate items** – Items like damaged clothes, expired food, or unnecessary goods should not be distributed.
- **Pack items securely** – Use strong boxes or sealed bags to prevent damage during transport.
- **Keep an inventory list** – Maintain a record of items received, packed, and distributed.
- **Assign volunteers for sorting and packing** – This helps manage large volumes of donations efficiently.
- **Coordinate with receiving locations** – Confirm the destination before dispatching donations.
- **Plan transportation carefully** – Ensure vehicles are available and routes are confirmed.
- **Provide basic distribution instructions** – Share item lists with receiving teams so they know what they are receiving.

Well-organized donation drives help ensure that support reaches communities efficiently and respectfully.

**YOU MUST NOT:**

- Self-deploy without authorization
- Enter floodwaters
- Conduct rescue operations
- Spread unverified information
- Post images of affected individuals without consent

***Your safety comes first.***

**Note:** Sphere Standards are an internationally agreed set of minimum standards for humanitarian response including humanitarian shelter. This includes guidelines such as having a minimum 3.5m<sup>2</sup> of covered living space per person (excluding cooking/hygiene areas) and a minimum height of 2m. You can Refer Chapter 4 pages 237 - 288 of ***The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter*** and ***Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (2018)*** for more information.

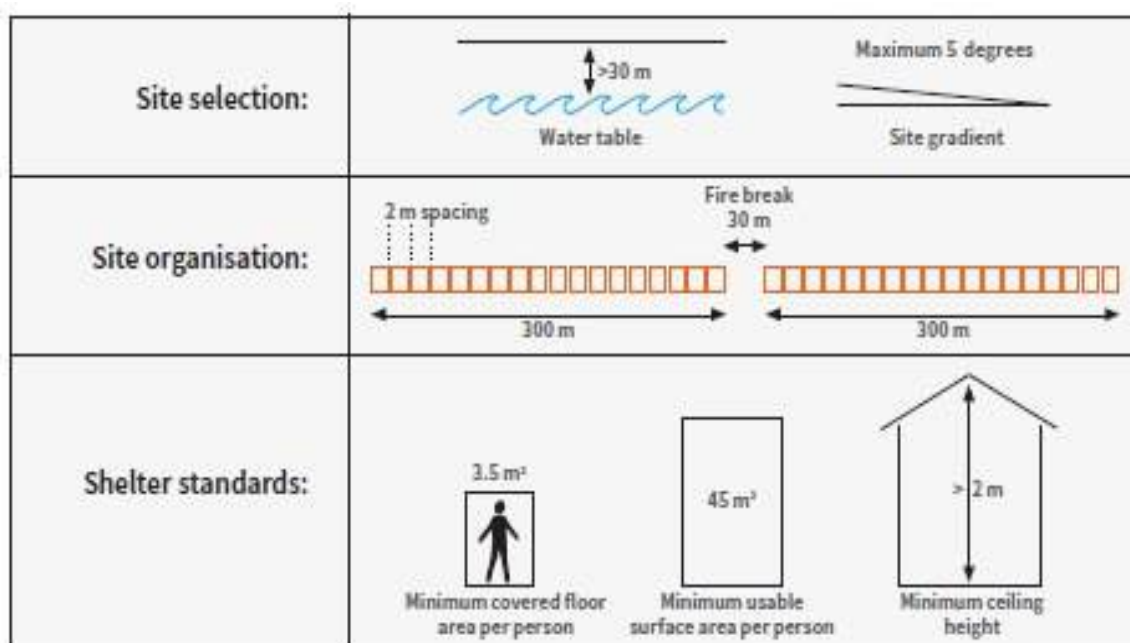


Figure 2.3 – Sphere Physical Shelter Standards

### 2.2.4 After a Disaster

Recovery takes months, sometimes years. **You can:**

- Participate in clean-up and rebuilding campaigns
  - Help document community needs
  - Assist children to return to school routines
  - Assist in community consultations including Psychological First Aid
  - Support environmental restoration and/or climate resilience activities for the future including;
- Help communities understand future climate risks and adapt to changing conditions
  - Organize village-level climate talks
  - Translate scientific information into simple language
  - Facilitate youth-led climate clubs
  - Promote local solutions and indigenous knowledge
  - Awareness on climate-resilient agriculture practices
  - Water-saving techniques
  - Home gardening initiatives
- Encourage reflection and learning

## 2.3 Code of Conduct for Youth Volunteers

The rule of thumb for any voluntary work is to ask before assisting. Never assume.

As a youth volunteer, you commit to:

**1. Do No Harm Principle:** You must avoid actions that create risk.

**2. Respect & Dignity:** Treat all individuals equally, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, language, or social background.

**3. Non-Discrimination:** Sri Lanka is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. You must respect cultural practices, and your service must be fair and inclusive.

**4. Political Neutrality:** Do not use disaster situations for political messaging

### **5. Confidentiality**

- Respect privacy and consent.
- Do not share personal information about affected individuals.
- Avoid taking photos without permission.

**6. Child Protection:** Report any concerns about child safety immediately to authorities

### **7. Responsible Social Media Use**

- Share only verified information
- Avoid sensational content
- Protect the dignity of affected communities

**8. Working with Vulnerable Groups**

- Always pay special attention to:
- Elderly persons
- Persons with disabilities
- Pregnant women
- Young children
- Single-headed households
- Estate and rural communities

**9. Communication and Coordination**

- Liaise with local authorities and community leaders
- Follow instructions from Divisional or District officials
- Report to your assigned supervisor
- Maintain simple activity records
- Attend briefings and debriefings

**10. Maintain Boundaries**

Youth volunteers are not trained rescuers, medical professionals, or security personnel. Always;

- Avoid giving unsolicited advice
- Avoid sharing personal contact information

**11. Ensure Volunteer Safety**

- Avoid entering unsafe areas
- Use protective equipment
- Work in teams
- Follow official guidance
- Seek support if distress
- Withdraw if situation becomes unsafe

## 2.2.4 Volunteer Deployment Checklist

Use the below checklist at all times from the time your community engagement begins;

### Before Deployment:

- ☐
- ☐ Confirm assignment
- ☐ Inform family
- ☐ Share emergency contact details with assigning party and family
- ☐ Check transport
- ☐ Check accommodation
- ☐ NIC
- ☐ Cash in hand
- ☐ Water
- ☐ Essential medicine
- ☐ Essential clothing
- ☐ Charger and/or powerbank
- ☐ Snacks
- ☐ Essential safety gear (eg: raincoat, torch, pocket knife, boots, leech socks)

### During Deployment:

- ☐ Follow instructions
- ☐ Respect community
- ☐ Safety
- ☐ Physical health
- ☐ Emotional well-being
- ☐ Report concerns

### After Deployment:

- ☐ Attend debrief
- ☐ Submit activity notes
- ☐ Reflect on lessons learned

## 2.2.5 Case Study

We present the following case study with three scenarios to help you understand how to act as volunteers.

After Cyclone Ditwah, severe weather caused flooding and landslides in parts of Uva Province. A group of youth volunteers planned to travel to Pelgahathenna, a village in Passara, Badulla District, heavily affected by landslides, to distribute essential relief items such as dry rations, hygiene packs, and drinking water.

During their efforts, they faced the following challenges:

However, they encountered the following challenges:

**Scenario 1:** Road access and communication was limited at the time. The volunteers feared that uncoordinated arrival could overwhelm local authorities and create duplication.

How did the youth volunteers overcome this challenge?

They;

- ❖ Contacted the Divisional Secretariat, the village head in Pelgahathenna, head of the temple in Passara Raja Maha Viharaya and the principal of Pelgahathenna Maha Vidyalaya to coordinate the distribution efforts.
- ❖ Prioritized essential needs of the community.
- ❖ Obtained an official list of families needing essentials.
- ❖ Confirmed safe travel routes with the authorities.
- ❖ Checked official updates from the Disaster Management Centre regarding landslide risks and road safety updates.
- ❖ Travelled as a group.
- ❖ Avoided traveling at night.
- ❖ Agreed on a physical meeting point and time.

**Scenario 2:** In Passara, many affected residents speak Tamil. The volunteers were aware that language sensitivity was important. None of the volunteers speak Tamil.

In order to overcome the language barrier, they;

- ❖ Identified a local Tamil-speaking community youth leader with the help of the Principal of Pelgathenna Maha Vidyalaya.
- ❖ Requested translation support from the community youth leader.
- ❖ Learnt simple and respectful Tamil phrases to gain trust of the residents.
- ❖ Avoided giving instructions to residents the volunteers could not explain clearly.

**Scenario 3:** Upon completion of the programme, the youth volunteers wanted to reflect on the effectiveness of their intervention. They were not sure how to do it, so they requested support from the leader of their organization.

The leader asked them to submit a brief activity report including;

- ❖ Items distributed
- ❖ Number of families reached
- ❖ What worked well
- ❖ What could improve
- ❖ Challenges faced
- ❖ Lessons learned

## CHAPTER 3

# Child Protection and Safeguarding



## 3.1 Introduction

Disasters affect more than homes, roads, and infrastructure—they also disrupt the systems that normally keep children safe. When communities are displaced due to floods, landslides, conflict, or other emergencies, many of the protections children rely on can weaken. Schools may close, families may become separated, privacy may be limited in temporary shelters, and stress within households may increase. In such situations, children can become more vulnerable to neglect, abuse, exploitation, and emotional harm.

For this reason, child protection and safeguarding must be a key priority during disaster response and recovery. Volunteers who work with affected communities need to be aware of these risks and ensure that their actions always prioritize the safety, dignity, and well-being of children.

This chapter introduces key child protection and safeguarding principles, highlights the legal and rights-based frameworks that protect children, and provides guidance on how volunteers can interact with children safely, respectfully, and responsibly in disaster-affected communities.

## 3.2 Legal and Rights-Based Frameworks for Child Protection

Children are recognized as rights-holders under international and national legal frameworks, and these protections apply even during emergencies.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations, establishes key principles for protecting children's rights. Some important provisions include:

**Article 3** – Best interests of the child

**Article 16** – Right to privacy and dignity

**Article 19** – Protection from all forms of violence

**Article 34** – Protection from sexual exploitation

Sri Lanka, as a State Party to the CRC, has national laws that reinforce these protections. These include the **National Child Protection Authority Act**, the **Children and Young Persons Ordinance**, and relevant provisions in the **Penal Code of Sri Lanka**.

For volunteers, understanding these frameworks helps you ensure that all engagement with children is safe, respectful, and aligned with national and international child protection standards.

### 3.3 Understanding Child Vulnerability in Disaster Settings

Disasters affect entire communities, but children are often more vulnerable because they depend on adults and protective systems around them. During emergencies, family routines, school environments, and regular supervision may be disrupted. Temporary shelters and relief camps can also be crowded and unfamiliar, creating additional challenges for children and their caregivers.

In these situations, children may face increased risks such as:

- Separation from caregivers
- Living in crowded shelter conditions
- Greater exposure to unfamiliar adults
- Reduced supervision when caregivers are overwhelmed
- Emotional neglect due to family stress
- Increased tension or violence within households
- Lack of privacy when sleeping, bathing, or changing

Disasters can also affect children emotionally. They may struggle to understand what has happened while witnessing the fear, stress, and uncertainty around them. Daily routines such as school, play, and sleep may also be disrupted.

Because children may not always express their feelings directly, their distress often appears through changes in behaviour. Volunteers working in disaster settings may observe different reactions among children.

The table below highlights some common behavioural responses that volunteers may notice.

| <b><i>What a Volunteer Might Notice</i></b>                                                              | <b><i>What the Child Might Be Feeling</i></b>            | <b><i>What the Child Might Need</i></b>                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Clinging to adults or not wanting to leave caregivers                                                    | Fear, insecurity, worry about being separated            | Reassurance, calm interaction, and the presence of trusted adults                 |
| Becoming very quiet, withdrawn, or avoiding activities                                                   | Sadness, confusion, or feeling overwhelmed               | Gentle encouragement, patience, and opportunities to participate without pressure |
| Crying easily or appearing anxious                                                                       | Fear, uncertainty, or distress about what has happened   | Comfort, a calm environment, and supportive adults who listen                     |
| Anger, aggression, or arguing with others                                                                | Frustration, fear, or lack of control over the situation | Clear boundaries, structured activities, and calm responses from adults           |
| Acting younger than their age (e.g., wanting to be carried, bedwetting, or needing constant reassurance) | Stress, insecurity, or a need for safety                 | Patience, reassurance, and predictable routines                                   |
| Restlessness, hyperactivity, or difficulty focusing                                                      | Stress, excess energy, or difficulty processing emotions | Physical play, games, and safe group activities                                   |

### 3.3.1 Key Takeaways for Volunteers

- ✓ Children's reactions after disasters are normal responses to stress.
- ✓ Children may struggle to express their emotions.
- ✓ Calm, patient, and supportive adults help children feel safe.
- ✓ Simple activities like play, drawing, and storytelling can help children recover emotionally.
- ✓ Volunteers should respond with empathy, patience, and respect.

## 3.4 Safeguarding: Practical Meaning in Relief Camps

Relief camps can be crowded, unfamiliar, and emotionally stressful places. Families may be dealing with loss, uncertainty, and fear. Children may also move around the camp more freely than usual.

Because of this, children can become more vulnerable to risks. As volunteers, it is important to ensure that our interactions with children are safe, respectful, and transparent.

Safeguarding is not about mistrusting people. It is about creating an environment where children are protected and volunteers can work responsibly.



### 3.4.1 What Safeguarding Looks Like in Practice

In relief settings, safeguarding means:

- Engaging with children in visible and open spaces
- Avoiding one-on-one situations with children whenever possible
- Ensuring activities take place where others can see and observe
- Maintaining professional and respectful boundaries
- Being alert to children's wellbeing and responding if concerns arise

### 3.4.2 Understanding “One-on-One Interaction”

Many people think one-on-one interaction only means private conversations, but it actually includes ***any situation where a volunteer is alone with a child.*** Even simple acts of helping can become one-on-one situations.

For example:

- Taking a child to the washroom
- Escorting a child to collect food or supplies
- Walking a child around the camp to find their family
- Moving to a quiet space to comfort a distressed child
- Helping a child separately during an activity

### ***A Simple Safeguarding Rule: The Two-Adult Principle***

A helpful rule in relief work is the **“Two-Adult Principle”** (Also known as the Rule of Two).

Whenever possible, ***at least two responsible adults should be present when interacting with children.***

Having another volunteer nearby helps to:

- ✓ Keep interactions visible and safe
- ✓ Protect children from harm Protect
- ✓ volunteers from
- ✓ misunderstandings

#### ***Remember***

Safeguarding is part of everyday volunteer behaviour. Small actions—such as where we stand, how we assist a child, and who is present during activities—all contribute to creating a safe environment.

### 3.4.3 Physical Boundaries and Touch

Children in distress may seek physical comfort. They may hug, sit close, or cling to volunteers. However, vulnerability increases risk.

In disaster contexts:

- Physical boundaries must always be adult-led.
- Unnecessary physical contact should be avoided.
- Children should never sit on volunteers' laps.
- Volunteers should not isolate children in private spaces.
- Interactions must remain visible and accountable.

This protects:

- The child from potential exploitation or grooming risk
- The volunteer from misunderstanding or allegations
- The integrity of the relief operation

Safe physical contact may sometimes be necessary (e.g., guiding a child through a crowded area). Such contact must be brief, appropriate, and observable.

Boundaries are protective. Not rejecting.

### 3.4.4. Privacy, Dignity, and the Strict No-Photo Principle

Children in disaster settings are often photographed for documentation or awareness. This practice must be approached with extreme caution. Children cannot legally provide meaningful informed consent for photography in high-risk contexts. Under Article 16 of the CRC, children have the right to privacy and protection from arbitrary interference.



In relief settings:

- No photos or videos of children should be taken without institutional authorisation.
- Personal phones must not be used for documentation.
- Children's stories should not be publicly shared without proper consent procedures.
- Social media exposure can create long-term digital risk.



A child's vulnerability must never become content. Privacy is not a luxury in emergencies. It is a right.

### 3.5 Safe Psychosocial Activities for Children

Psychosocial activities are important in disaster response because they help children regain a **sense of safety and normalcy**. These activities can:

- Restore daily routines
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Support emotional regulation
- Encourage connection with other children



However, all activities should follow **basic safeguarding principles**. Activities should be:

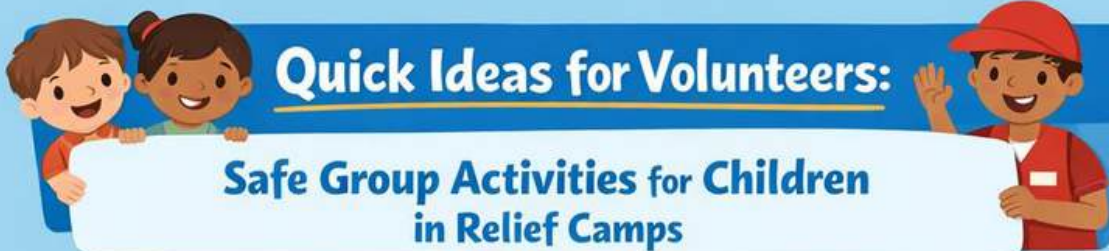
Group-based rather than individual

Conducted in open and visible spaces

Age-appropriate for the children involved

Non-invasive and respectful of children's experiences

Voluntary, allowing children to join only if they feel comfortable



## Quick Ideas for Volunteers:

### Safe Group Activities for Children in Relief Camps

Fun, safe activities to help children feel calm and connected.



#### Drawing & Colouring

Art corner for drawing favourite things.



#### Group Games

Circle games, ball games, or "Simon Says."



#### Storytelling Time

Telling stories of hope & courage.



#### Songs & Music

Singing songs, clapping, & simple instruments.



#### Craft Activities

Making crafts & camp decorations.



#### Drama & Role-Play

Fun skits & puppet shows.



#### Relaxation Exercises

Breathing and quiet time.



#### Dance & Movement

Safe group dancing and games.



#### Nature Exploration

Easy walks & nature activities.



#### Sharing Circles

Story sharing in a group.



#### Safety Reminder:

Always in open areas & with at least **TWO** adults present!

## 3.6 Important Things Volunteers Should Avoid

Volunteers should be careful not to unintentionally cause distress. Avoid:

- Forcing children to talk about traumatic experiences
- Singling out distressed children in front of others
- Making promises about future help or continued support
- Using physical closeness as a way to comfort children

### **Key Reminder for Volunteers**

The purpose of psychosocial activities is to help children feel safe, calm, and connected.

The goal is **stability and support — not therapy.**

## 3.7 Teaching Body Safety in Disaster Contexts

Where appropriate and with the approval of camp coordinators or responsible authorities, volunteers may conduct basic body safety awareness sessions with children in group settings. These discussions can help children understand personal safety and how to seek help if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Key messages should be simple and easy for children to understand, such as:

- My body belongs to me.
- I can say “No” if something makes me uncomfortable.
- Safe touch feels okay and does not hurt or scare me.
- Unsafe touch makes me feel uncomfortable, scared, or confused.
- I can tell a trusted adult if something feels wrong.

When discussing body safety, volunteers should ensure that sessions are:

- Simple and easy to understand
- Age-appropriate and sensitive
- Non-graphic and respectful
- Conducted in group settings rather than individually
- Supervised by responsible adults



**Remember**

The purpose of body safety education is to empower children with knowledge and confidence, not to frighten them.



## 3.8 Reporting Obligations and Escalation

Volunteers may sometimes notice situations that raise concerns about a child's safety. In such cases, it is important to report concerns through proper channels.

Volunteers should report:

- Suspicion of abuse
- Signs of neglect
- Inappropriate behaviour by adults towards children
- When a child discloses harm or unsafe experiences

Reporting should follow your organization's safeguarding procedures (if you have any) and may involve notifying authorities empowered under the National Child Protection Authority Act.

**Important: What Volunteers Should *NOT* Do**

Volunteers should not:

- Conduct their own investigations
- Confront suspected perpetrators directly
- Promise secrecy to a child about serious harm

If you are unsure, seek guidance and escalate the concern.

Silence or inaction can sometimes allow harm to continue.

## 3.9 Case Study

We present the following case study to help you understand how to act as volunteers.

### Scenario: A Child Seeking Exclusive Attention

In a crowded flood relief camp, a 10-year-old child frequently approaches a volunteer and refuses to participate in group activities. The child insists on sitting next to the volunteer and says,

***“You’re the only one who understands me.”***

The volunteer begins to notice that the child is becoming very dependent on their attention, which could create discomfort for the volunteer and may isolate the child from other children.

How should the volunteer respond in this situation?

The volunteer;

- ❖ Calmly acknowledges the child's feelings and reassure them that they are heard.
- ❖ Encourages the child to join group activities with other children in the camp.
- ❖ Avoids developing exclusive or one-on-one interactions with the child.
- ❖ Informs a team leader or supervisor about the situation so additional support can be arranged.
- ❖ Where possible, engages the child's caregiver or responsible adult.



### What can volunteers learn from this situation?

Clinginess or dependency can sometimes be a normal response to stress or trauma during disasters. Volunteers should respond with empathy, while encouraging safe group interaction and inclusion rather than exclusive attention.

# CHAPTER 4

## Psychological First Aid



## 4.1 Introduction

During disasters and emergencies, people may experience fear, confusion, grief, or distress. In these moments, what many individuals need most is calm, compassionate human support. Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a practical way of providing that support.

**PFA is not professional counseling or therapy**, and volunteers are not expected to “fix” people’s trauma. Instead, it focuses on offering simple, humane assistance that helps people feel safer, calmer, and more supported during difficult situations.

### **Psychological First Aid involves:**

- Providing practical and respectful support without being intrusive
- Identifying immediate needs and concerns, such as safety, food, water, or information
- Listening to people without pressuring them to talk about the event
- Helping individuals feel calmer and more reassured
- Connecting people to services, information, and social support

This chapter introduces the basic principles of Psychological First Aid and how volunteers can use them when supporting individuals and communities affected by disasters. By understanding these principles, volunteers can become a calm and supportive presence, while ensuring that their actions remain ethical, culturally sensitive, and respectful of people’s dignity and wellbeing.

## 4.2 The Core of PFA (Principles & Ethics)

### 4.2.1 The "Do No Harm" Principle

In Psychological First Aid, the ***"Do No Harm" principle*** reminds volunteers that their actions should always support people's wellbeing and never unintentionally cause further distress or risk. Our role is to ensure that our presence helps stabilize the situation rather than complicating it.

To support this approach, we have included a ***Volunteer Pledge*** that teams can use to remind themselves of responsible and ethical engagement during disaster response. (***See Figure 4.1***).

#### 4. 2.1.1 Safety: Avoiding Putting People in Further Danger

Safety is the first priority in Psychological First Aid, which means ensuring that both affected people and volunteers are not exposed to additional physical or emotional harm.

| Physical Safety:                                                                                                                                   | Psychological Safety:                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Volunteer Safety:                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before approaching, ensure the area is secure (e.g., away from unstable buildings or traffic).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid forcing someone to retell their trauma, as this can "re-traumatize" them.</li> <li>• If a person is overwhelmed, help them find a quiet, calm space away from media cameras or onlookers</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You cannot help others if you are in danger.</li> <li>• Know when to step back and call for professional backup.</li> </ul> |

## The "Do No Harm" Pledge

As a volunteer providing Psychological First Aid, I recognize that my primary responsibility is to protect the safety, dignity, and rights of those I assist. I solemnly pledge to uphold the following principles:

**1. Prioritize Safety** I will not take any action that puts a person in further physical or psychological danger. I will remain aware of my surroundings and ensure that my presence provides a sense of security, not a source of risk.

**2. Respect Dignity** I will treat every individual with the utmost respect, regardless of their background, beliefs, or circumstances. I will honor their privacy and cultural norms, ensuring that my support is offered with humility and without judgment.

**3. Uphold Rights** I will ensure that people can access help fairly and without discrimination. I will respect their right to make their own decisions and will never force help upon someone who is not ready to receive it.

**4. Practice Ethical Communication** I will be honest, calm, and patient. I will not make false promises or give misleading information. I will listen more than I speak, and I will never pressure anyone to share their story.

**5. Maintain Confidentiality** I will protect the stories and personal details shared with me. I understand that trust is the foundation of PFA, and I will only break confidentiality if there is an immediate risk of harm to the person or others.

**6. Know My Limits** I recognize that I am a volunteer, not a professional counselor. I will stay within the boundaries of my training and refer individuals to specialized support when their needs exceed my capabilities.

**Volunteer Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 4.1: Volunteer Pledge

### 4.2.1.2 Dignity: Respecting Cultural Norms

Providing support with dignity means respecting people's cultural values, personal boundaries, and the difficult circumstances they are experiencing.

| Cultural Sensitivity                                                                                                                                                                                            | Respectful Distance:                                                                                                                                                      | Language                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In our Sri Lankan context, be mindful of gender dynamics</li> <li>• (e.g., a male volunteer asking a female survivor if she prefers to speak with a woman).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observe local customs regarding personal space and touch.</li> <li>• Always ask, "Is it okay if I sit here with you?"</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use simple, respectful language.</li> <li>• Avoid jargon or "talking down" to people because they are in a vulnerable state.</li> </ul> |

### 4.2.1.3 Rights: Ensuring Access without Discrimination

Psychological First Aid should always be delivered in a fair and inclusive way, ensuring that everyone can access support regardless of their background or circumstances.

| Fairness                                                                                                                                                           | Inclusivity                                                                                                                                                                                   | Information                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help should be given based on need, not based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or social status.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively look for those who might be ignored—the elderly, people with disabilities, or those who don't speak the dominant local language.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People have a right to know what is happening.</li> <li>• Provide clear, factual updates about where to find food, water, or medical aid.</li> </ul> |

## 4.2.2 Ethical Engagement

Ethical engagement is about the quality of the relationship you build in those few minutes of contact.

### 4.2.2.1 Honesty & Trustworthiness

#### Manage Expectations:

- It is tempting to say "Everything will be okay," but we don't know that. Instead, say, "I will do my best to help you find information about [specific need]."

#### Stick to Facts:

- If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it. Say, "I don't have that information right now, but I will try to find out who does."

### 4.2.2.2 Respecting Autonomy

#### Empowerment:

- Survivors have often lost control over their lives. Give them back small choices: "Would you like to sit in the shade or over here?" or "Would you like some water now or later?"

#### No Pressure:

- Respect their right to refuse help. If they say "No," let them know you are available if they change their mind later.

### 4.2.2.3 Confidentiality

#### The Sacred Trust:

- Whatever a person shares with you stays with you. Do not share their stories on social media or with other volunteers as "gossip."

#### The Exception (Safety First):

- You must break confidentiality if the person mentions they want to hurt themselves, hurt someone else, or if a child is being abused. In these cases, immediately inform a supervisor or a professional.

## 4.3 The PFA Action Principles (Look, Listen, Link)

**LOOK:** Check for safety.

- Check for people with obvious urgent basic needs.
- Check for people with serious distress reactions.

**LISTEN:** Approach people who may need support.

- Ask about people's needs and concerns.
- Listen to people, and help them to feel calm.

**LINK:** Help people address basic needs and access services.

- Help people cope with problems.
- Give information.
- Connect people with loved ones and social support.

## 4.4 Communication Skills (The "Youth-Friendly" Approach)

The goal of PFA communication is to help a person feel safe, connected, and calm.

### 4.4.1 Active Listening: Beyond Just Hearing:

Active listening is a physical and mental act. It shows the survivor that they are the most important person in that moment.

Body Language (**SOLER Technique**):

- **S**it or stand at a comfortable angle (not "towering" over them).
- **O**pen posture (no crossed arms).
- **L**ean slightly forward to show interest.
- **E**ye contact that is gentle, not a "stare-down".
- **R**elaxed movements to help lower their anxiety.

### 4.4.2 Nodding & Affirmation:

Small gestures like a slow nod or saying "I see" or "Mmm" encourage them to continue without you interrupting.

### 4.4.3 Silence is Okay:

You don't need to fill every second with words. Sometimes, just sitting quietly with someone is the most powerful support you can give.

### 4.4.4 What to Say vs. What NOT to Say

As a youth volunteer, your words should be like a blanket—offering warmth and protection, not pressure.

| DO Say (Validating)                                       | DON'T Say (Dismissive)                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "I am here for you. You are safe now."                    | "Everything will be fine." (You don't know that)                   |
| "It's completely understandable that you feel this way."  | "Don't cry / Be brave / Be a man." (Suppressing emotion)           |
| "I'm so sorry this happened to you."                      | "It could be worse; at least you're alive." (Minimizes their pain) |
| "Tell me what you need right now so I can help."          | "I know how you feel." (Every experience is unique)                |
| "You've been through a lot. It's okay to take your time." | "You need to move on/be strong for your family."                   |

*Table 4.1: What to Say vs. What NOT to Say*

### 4.4.5 Cultural Sensitivity: The Sri Lankan Context

In Sri Lanka, our culture is built on deep respect and specific social "unwritten rules." Volunteers must be mindful of these to avoid causing accidental offense.

#### Respect for Elders:

- When approaching an elder, use respectful terms like "Aunty," "Uncle," "Nandha," or "Maama."

#### Gender Considerations:

- In highly distressed situations, it is often best for a female volunteer to approach a female survivor, especially if physical comfort (like a hand on the shoulder) is needed.
- Always ask for permission before entering someone's personal space.

#### Religious Boundaries:

- Be mindful of religious symbols (threads, crosses, or hijabs).
- Never offer religious "explanations" for a tragedy (e.g., "It was karma/God's will") unless the person brings it up themselves

#### Physical Contact:

- While a hug might feel natural to a youth volunteer, it may be uncomfortable for some.
- Always ask: "Is it okay if I sit next to you?" or "Would you like me to hold your hand?"

## 4.5 Identifying Distress & Vulnerable Groups

- **Recognizing Distress:** Physical symptoms (shaking, headaches) vs. Emotional symptoms (guilt, numbness, anger).
- **Who Needs Special Attention?**
  - Children and adolescents.
  - People with health conditions or disabilities.
  - People at risk of discrimination or violence.
- **When to Refer:** Clear "Red Flags" that require professional intervention (e.g., identifying psychosis or suicidal ideation).

## 4.6 Case Studies

| Scenario Type                 | Crisis Situation                                                                                                                                  | Model Action & Reflection                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4.6.1<br>Principles in Action | <b>The Aftermath of a Local Flood:</b> A 16-year-old girl is sitting alone by a destroyed community center. She is staring blankly and shivering. | <p><b>Look:</b> Check for immediate physical dangers and urgent medical needs. Ensure the environment is safe.</p> <p><b>Listen:</b> Use an opening like: "Hello, I'm [Name], a volunteer. Would it be okay if I sit here with you?" This respects her autonomy.</p> <p><b>Link:</b> If she refuses to talk, respect her silence. Offer practical comfort (blanket/water) and stay nearby so she is not alone.</p> |

### 4.6.2 Peer Support & Self-Care

A fellow volunteer is overwhelmed and starts crying after hearing a survivor's story. He/she is experiencing emotional fatigue or secondary trauma.

**Application:** Move him/her to a quiet area away from survivors to protect the integrity of the operation. Validate their feelings: "It's understandable to feel this way".

**Boundaries:** Your role is immediate "First Aid," not therapy. If distress

**The Plan:** Use a "Three-Step Reset":

- Deep breathing,
- a brief physical break, and
- a "buddy debrief" (informal conversation between two peers following a shift or a stressful interaction)

### 4.6.3 The "Link" Challenge

**Hidden Distress:** You are helping a family with forms. The father is vocal about building materials. The teenage daughter is nauseous, whispering that her "heart won't stop racing" and she hasn't slept in 3 days.

**Identifying Distress:** The daughter's physical/psychological symptoms are the immediate PFA priority. Kneel to her level and use a calm voice to create a private space while remaining observable.

**Referral Path:** If physical symptoms do not subside, link her to a medical officer immediately. Inform her father and supervisor to act in her best interests.

**Self-Check:** If overwhelmed by the father's shouting, take a deep breath and ask a fellow volunteer to assist him so you can focus on the daughter's health.

## 4.8. Readiness Exercises

In this chapter, we have included a few additional exercises that can be used with volunteer teams before they are deployed to support affected communities. These exercises help volunteers practice key Psychological First Aid principles, reflect on possible situations, and build confidence in responding to people experiencing distress.

### **Exercise 1: The "Self-Awareness" Mirror**

Before you can help others, you must know your own starting point. Answer these honestly for yourself:

1. **Motivations:** Why do I want to help? Is it to feel "heroic," or is it to serve? (Remember: PFA is about the survivor, not the volunteer).
2. **Triggers:** What kind of stories or situations might make me feel overwhelmed or angry?
3. **Biases:** Am I more likely to help someone who looks like me or shares my background? How can I challenge that today?

### **Exercise 2: The "Link" Mapping (Practical Preparation)**

In your local community in Sri Lanka, PFA isn't just about talk; it's about Link. Fill in this map:

1. **Medical:** Where is the nearest government hospital or clinic?
2. **Protection:** Who is the local Grama Niladhari or police contact?
3. **Basic Needs:** Where is the closest reliable source of clean water and dry rations?
4. **Mental Health:** If a case is too heavy for me, which professional (like a Counselor or the 1926 helpline) will I call?

**Exercise 3: The "Three-Sentence" Summary** If you had to explain PFA to a friend who knows nothing about it, how would you do it using only three sentences?

**Sentence 1 (The Goal):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sentence 2 (The Method):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sentence 3 (The Boundary):** \_\_\_\_\_

## Closing Thought: The Volunteer's Compass

"I am a bridge, not the destination. I provide the immediate support that allows a person to find their own way back to strength."

## Checklist for Field Readiness

Before supporting communities in disaster-affected areas, it is helpful for volunteers to take a moment to prepare themselves. This simple checklist can help you reflect on whether you are ready to provide support in a safe, responsible, and mindful way.

- ☐ I have signed the Do No Harm Pledge.
- ☐ I have programmed emergency contacts into my phone.
- ☐ I have a "Self-Care" plan for when I feel tired.
- ☐ I understand that "Listening" is more important than "Fixing."

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