

Evaluation of the RAPID Psychological First Aid (PFA) Implementation in Rural Appalachian Western NC: 2022 through 2024

Overview: The evaluation of the RAPID PFA training program shows significant improvements in participants' confidence and preparedness across various skills and knowledge areas.

Background: Studies like Wang et al. (2021) and guidance from bodies like the American Psychiatric Association affirm that PFA improves psychosocial support capacity, enhances self-efficacy, and fosters resilience during crises. Beverley Raphael's work highlights that a quarter of disaster-affected populations may experience immediate distress, underscoring PFA's importance in early intervention. RAPID-PFA's proven applicability across settings emphasizes its relevance for rural Appalachia, where mental health disparities are pronounced. In line with nursing leaders' recommendations to use PFA for resilience-building post-COVID-19, this program positions public health professionals to deliver essential psychological care, bridging mental health gaps and strengthening community resilience and readiness.

Methods: The study utilized a pre-and post-survey design, administering standardized questionnaires to participants immediately before and after the RAPID PFA training to measure changes in confidence, preparedness, and knowledge, with data analyzed using paired t-tests to identify statistically significant improvements attributable to the intervention.

Results: Mean increases and significant t-test results ($p < .001$ for all items) showed significantly higher confidence levels across all attitude items post-training. Notable shifts include increased confidence in listening and communication, with "Very Confident" responses rising from 32% to 59%, as well as in assessing intervention needs, where most participants shifted from "Confident" to "Very Confident." Additionally, assisting with PFA saw marked improvements, as the mean confidence level increased from 3.30 to 4.47. These improvements indicate confidence increases in key PFA skills. Participants reported significantly greater preparedness across all skills, with all items reaching statistical significance ($p < .001$). Examples include increases in listening and communication preparedness, where the mean rose from 4.06 to 4.59 and "Unprepared" responses dropped to zero. Additionally, preparedness ratings rose from 3.54 to 4.45 for assessing intervention needs and from 4.08 to 4.55 for supporting basic needs. These findings indicate that training significantly bolstered participants' preparedness, particularly in assessing, prioritizing, and responding to needs. Knowledge improvements were less uniform, with significant increases in correct responses for resilience predictors and Maslow's Hierarchy, where correct answers rose from 54% to 77% ($p < .001$). Confidence in recognizing stress contagion remained high pre- and post-training (91% and 96%, respectively). However, some items did not reach statistical significance post-training, including understanding the role of peritraumatic dissociation in predicting PTSD and the concept of resilient leadership.

Discussion: The RAPID PFA training effectively increased both confidence and preparedness in essential PFA skills. Although knowledge gains were evident in some areas, further training focus may be needed for topics like resilient leadership and PTSD predictors to ensure comprehensive knowledge retention.