

ENHANCING AND CONSOLIDATING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID SKILLS



THE ROLE OF A MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDER

The role of a Mental Health First Aider is to provide early intervention for someone who may be developing a mental health issue, experiencing a worsening of an existing mental illness or is in crisis. A Mental Health First Aiders role is to provide early intervention and support until the person engages with professional help or the crisis resolves.

Mental Health First Aiders are not trained to be therapists, psychiatrists or counsellors. Their role in the workplace is not one of mediation or conflict resolution. The support offered by a Mental Health First Aider is provided through non-judgemental listening and guidance using a practical, evidence-based action plan. The course is based on guidelines developed through the expert consensus of people with lived experience of mental health problems and professionals.

It is essential that a Mental Health First Aider understands that the role is not one of ongoing “therapeutic” intervention.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH

Behavioural signs could include:

- Not getting things done
- Excessive fear or worry
- Indecisiveness
- Loss of confidence
- Erratic behaviour
- Withdrawing from others
- Avoidance
- Isolation
- Reduced participation in activities
- Dishevelled appearance
- Conflict with peers, family or friends

Physical signs could include:

- Tired all the time
- Moving more slowly or appearing agitated
- Persistent muscle aches and pains
- Sick and run down
- Headaches
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Weight loss or gain
- Gastro-intestinal problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Difficulty with memory



ADVANCED COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Effective communication is essential to providing Mental Health First Aid, these are skills we can develop and practice.

The following are skills which can improve your communication:

Build rapport

This happens when a person feels that they are safe, understood and that you can be trusted. When we're struggling, even if we're holding back on details, we simply want to be heard. Building rapport relies on a number of things, body language is one of the most important. Regardless of the words we say it's our non-verbal cues that people will pick up first. So, if our face looks stern and our arms are folded, for example, it won't matter if we're saying we are there to help because our body says something completely different. Keeping an open body posture, maintaining good eye contact, paying attention to our facial expressions and relaxing can all help to develop openness and display empathy. When a person is telling their story if we reflect back what they have told us it can not only ensure we have the details correct but also shows the person that we understand their perspective and that they have been heard, this will help to build rapport.

Listening

Also known as attending. This is when we orient ourselves to the person we are communicating with. Listening requires us to give the person our full, undivided attention, and that isn't always easy! When attending to someone we need to keep a check of the chatter in our own minds, we will undoubtedly run a commentary in our head which could include wondering if the person likes us, is sharing all information and anticipating the next question or action rather than paying attention to their response. Keep a check of the chatter and be mindful of your own emotions.

Slowing down the pace of a conversation can help improve your listening as well as paying attention not only to what the person is saying verbally but also to what isn't being said. Observing body language can help us to gain deeper insight.



When we are truly listening, we are not speaking, resist the urge to move conversations along without seeking clarification, understanding or an opportunity for the person to tell you more about their situation. To enhance our attending skills, we need to let the other person know that we are listening, ways to do this include using minimal encouragers such as **nodding your head**, saying **“uh-huh”** or **“yes”**.

Silence is a powerful listening skill – if a person has shared with you details of what is happening in their life and you launch straight into asking another question or moving to the next stage of ALGEE, you miss the opportunity to gain a more in-depth response. People fill silences, we want the person we are supporting to be the one that fills the silence as they are always our primary concern.



Validation

This is when we recognise and accept without judgement another person’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It’s not about agreeing for the sake of it, it’s about recognition that the person’s experience is understandable. Validation is an opportunity to let the person know that their pain makes sense. An example could be **“sounds like you’re dealing with a lot right now, it must be really difficult”**.

Open-ended questions

These are questions that require more than a one-word answer. Open-ended questions provide a space for the person to give details with a focus on **“who, what, where, when, why and how”**. Not only does it help the Mental Health First Aider to assess the situation but, more importantly, it gives permission for the person they are supporting to talk more about what it is that is concerning them. An example of an open-ended question is **“you said you didn’t want to speak to your GP, can you tell me more about that?”**.

SUPPORTING SOMEONE IN DISTRESS

When assessing if a person is in crisis, or in distress, it can sometimes be obvious from how they present and other times alarm bells can ring because of the things people may say. Distress is often expressed through negative emotions such as sobbing, irritability, anger, fear or panic. You may notice that there is a deterioration in their physical appearance or personal hygiene.

If you are supporting a person who is distressed then slow down the pace of conversation, take them seriously, be warm and non-judgemental. Focus your attention on the person in distress and let them speak without interruption. It can really help to reflect back what they've told you, to demonstrate that you are listening and you understand. Sometimes when we are distressed and overwhelmed, we think we will feel that way forever, this is not the case, let the person know that help is available and that you want to help them.

Share information about sources of support, from health professionals to websites and e-mental health resources. Ask them about the support they have from their family, friends and wider community and encourage them to talk to the people they trust about how they are feeling.

If someone is in distress don't ignore the signs, do let them know that you care and you want to help. If the person is angry, or agitated and you feel uncomfortable then maybe suggest that you give them some space and speak again later in the day or when they feel a little calmer. Anger isn't always a pre-cursor to violence, but you must never feel you have to endure the anger of another because you know it is an expression of distress, put your own safety at the forefront of your mind.

Things that people may say that can indicate distress include:

"I can't keep doing this", "I'm not coping", "I can't cope" and "I don't want to be here anymore".

If the person is in crisis, then we cannot wait for things to settle down, we have to act now. If you are concerned the person maybe suicidal then ask them directly – **"I'm worried about you, sometimes when life gets hard people have thoughts of suicide" or "I'm concerned about some of the things you've told me, how bad has it got for you, are you thinking about killing yourself?"**.

Our next steps, if the person is suicidal, are to work together to keep them safe and connect them with professional help. Professional help could be:

- **GP – offer to help them make an emergency appointment**
- **Mental Health Crisis Team – call the national number 1300 MH CALL (1300 642255)**
- **Hospital Emergency Department**
- **000**

Never keep suicide a secret! Even if the person begs you not to tell anyone, let the person know you care too much for them to keep a secret this big and that you want them to be safe.

ACCESSING EAP

EAP stands for Employee Assistance Program. These are services provided free of charge to employees by employers to support their mental health and wellbeing and can be accessed for any issue regardless of whether it is work related or personal. EAP is a confidential counselling service designed to help people with difficulties and stressors in their lives, before they become a major event. Employee Assistance Program providers will NEVER disclose information to the employer about an employee, if information is required for whatever reason the employee's consent is required. Even when invoices are generated for the services provided, they are anonymous, there is nothing in the invoices that will identify the person using the service.

AM I TAKING ON TOO MUCH?

You will no doubt recall from your training the importance of setting boundaries and taking care of our own mental health as Mental Health First Aiders. Boundary setting is kind, for the person we are supporting and for ourselves. We must not overstep our level of competence and knowledge as it can be really detrimental to the person we are trying to support, leave the therapy to the professionals!



Some signs that you may be taking on too much can include:

- We begin to notice an impact upon our own mental health and we're worrying excessively about the person, finding it difficult to sleep or concentrate and we are making ourselves available 24/7. This is not our role.
- We feel the person is becoming dependant upon us. They may contact us for emotional support around anything that is happening in their life and expect us to drop everything and 'be there'. Healthy coping means that the person has information that helps them to seek support from the most appropriate place. We need to remind ourselves we are Mental Health First Aiders and not enablers.
- You find yourself covering for the person or picking up their work tasks regularly because you want to help them. This is not helpful, if we find ourselves being deceitful and doing another person's job then we have moved away from our role as a Mental Health First Aider.
- You feel you are being manipulated. If a person makes you feel guilty for not being available to them on their terms, this is an indicator that you should reflect upon. Remember the first E in the ALGEE plan – encourage the person to get appropriate professional help.
- Other people notice that you may be taking on too much. If someone raises this with you, they may well have a valid viewpoint that you've missed. Listen to them, they wouldn't raise it if they didn't care. If you want an independent point of view around whether you're taking on too much, then contact Tina Winchester, your MHFA Instructor for a chat – tina@careerdevelopmentcentre.com.au.

SELF-CARE

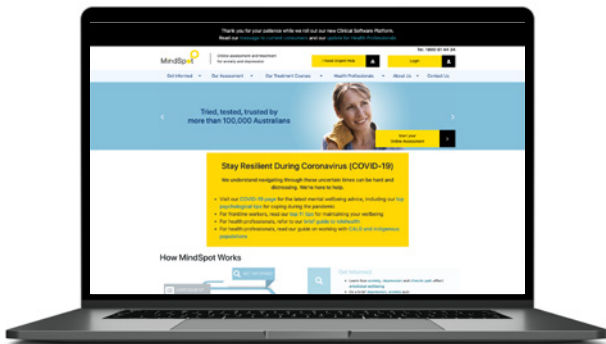
When we support someone in our role as a Mental Health First Aider, it will deplete us physically and emotionally depending upon the person and the issues they are struggling with. Self-care is a deliberate activity to maintain or improve our health. It is not selfish or a waste of time. We need to replenish if we are going to cope effectively with the stressors in our own lives and supporting other people.



If we neglect our own needs we are in danger of deeper levels of unhappiness, low self-esteem and feelings of resentment. If we only focus our time and effort on taking care of others then we risk becoming burned out.

Research shows us that prioritising good sleep, a healthy diet and regular exercise keep us well. Factor in also spending time in the company of people you trust, engage in activities that bring you joy - this can be anything from reading, watching TV, taking a bath, walking the dog, doing a puzzle, sitting in nature, calling a friend, meditating, writing in a journal, eating a good meal ...the list is endless!

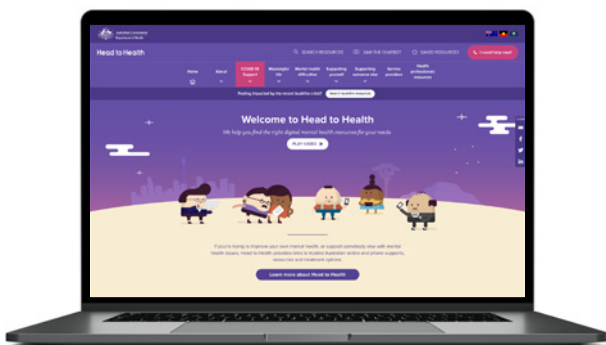
HELPFUL WEBSITES



mindspot.org.au



moodgym.com.au



headtohealth.gov.au



mhfa.com.au



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