



**MENTAL HEALTH  
FIRST AID &  
REMOTE WORKING**





**MENTAL  
HEALTH  
FIRST AID**  
Australia

# 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.



## MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID ACTION PLAN

### MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID **ACTION PLAN**

- A**pproach the person, assess and assist with any crisis
- L**isten and communicate non-judgementally
- G**ive support and information
- E**ncourage the person to get appropriate professional help
- E**ncourage other supports



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# POSSIBLE INDICATORS OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH

- **Feeling sad or low, persistently**
- **Feeling anxious or worried, persistently**
- **Emotional outbursts, irritability/anger**
- **Sleep difficulties**
- **Changes in appetite**
- **Fatigue, tired all the time**
- **Feelings of worthlessness**
- **Feeling guilty for no reason**

### Issues that may arise when working remotely

For some employees, the ability to work from home will be a positive experience, with increased productivity, no commuting and fostering a good work/life balance. For other being 'forced' to work from home can have a negative impact, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnect and can have a detrimental effect on mental health.

Issue that may arise can include:

- Loneliness and isolation
- Lack of collaboration and inclusiveness,
- Lack of communication and uncertainty about their role or the future
- Being unable to set healthy boundaries between work and personal time,
- Lack of motivation

Understanding how people feel is often the first step in supporting them, but it can be a difficult topic to address when working remotely. We tend to question ourselves when considering having a mental health conversation with someone face to face, this can be even more so when working virtually.

You may find yourself wondering if you have read the signs correctly as it can be a challenge to pick up on signs when you are observing a person through a camera or on the telephone.

It is normal for people to experience heightened levels of stress or anxiety when there is such uncertainty around due to Covid-19. The only way to determine how much this heightened level of stress or anxiety is impacting upon a person's mental health is to have a conversation.



## Possible Indicators of Poor Mental Health When Working Remotely

Everyone is different and presents or expresses themselves in different ways. The following are some signs to look for that may indicate a person is struggling:

- Turning off their camera in meetings
- Choice of emojis – for example, is the person choosing emojis that indicate sadness, anger, or anguish and this is out of character
- Not getting things done
- Any changes in presentation or behaviours –

for example, less well kept, late for meetings, missing meetings, reticence, combative or argumentative supporting to be the one that fills the silence as they are always our primary concern.





# ALGEE FROM A DISTANCE



## Approach the person, assess and assist with any crisis

Consider firstly the privacy of the person, is there anyone else around at home or are they home alone?

You may need to be a little more direct and transparent with your conversation and check-in to see how they are going. Remember to always remain empathetic and non-judgemental.

Share with the person the things that have led you to be concerned, the things you may have seen, heard, or noticed.

As you will be communicating virtually, ask the person to let you know if they feel too upset or distressed right now – it may be difficult to pick up on this if you are not face to face.

Validate their experience and let them know you want to help.

## Listen and communicate non-judgmentally

Pay attention to your tone of voice and the pace of the conversation. As our non-verbal cues may be more difficult to interpret via telephone or webcam, we may need to slow things down and be mindful of the way we are communicating. A loud or shrill tone of voice may be off-putting, a confident and calm tone will be reassuring.

When demonstrating you are listening to a person it can be helpful to reflect your understanding of what they have said. This can not only show that you have understood but also provides an opportunity for the person to correct your understanding if needs be.

Use minimal encouragers – this could be by using silence to give the person time to consider their responses and not be rushed. Or encouraging the person by saying “tell me more about ...”.

Pay attention to their tone of voice and pace – are they finding it difficult to speak, or seem breathless? Does it sound as though they are choking back tears or are they speaking very quickly as if anxious?

Be patient, try not to interrupt.



## Give support and information

Ask the person, “how can I support you?”. If they say there is nothing you can do, or they don’t know then ask them what it is that concerns them the most. Breaking down issues into small, manageable chunks can help with overwhelm.

Let them know you care and that you can be available to chat if they need it. Remember though, boundaries are especially important, don’t offer to make yourself available 24/7, it may be helpful to provide information about sources of support outside of office hours or when you have other commitments.

Reassure them that it is normal to feel some level of uncertainty and worry right now. Talk to them about how much the way they are feeling is impacting upon their work and relationships and how long it has been going on for. This can help you to open discussions about when they might want to consider accessing professional help.

Discuss possible options for support – remember not to insist or force a person to access professional help. If they are not in crisis and choose to think about their options, that is their choice.

## Encourage the person to get appropriate professional help

Provide information about sources of support – EAP, GP, e-health services, helplines. If they are reluctant then explore the reasons why, do they have good and credible information? Can you break down some of the barriers to support?



## Encourage other supports

Ask them if they have spoken to anyone else about how they feel. If they have supportive family or friends, then encourage them to reach out to them. Asking the question “who do you trust” can be a good way of determining whether they do have people around them that could help.

If they are reluctant to talk to their friends or loved ones you can open the discussion with them about what it is that is holding them back. Sometimes family are not a source of support so it’s always best to check.



# WORKING WITH CRISIS

## & DISTRESS REMOTELY

If the person appears to be in distress (not in crisis and at risk) ask if they have another person nearby that can support them. Stay on the phone/chat/video for as long as is reasonable or as long as they need you.

Before ending the conversation try to agree on a safety plan, ie. Who will they contact if things become more difficult? If it is appropriate to the relationship you could send a text after the call to let them know you are thinking of them.



If the person is in crisis (unable to calm down, highly distressed or suicidal), try to find out where they are. If the person is at risk of harm to themselves or others you may need to contact emergency services. Safety of the individual and others around them is paramount.

If you are concerned the person is suicidal, but they haven't stated it overtly, remember to ask them directly "are you having thoughts of suicide" or "are you thinking about killing yourself". If the person tells you they are having suicidal thoughts the next step is to work together to keep the person safe and the final step always is to connect the person to professional help.

When supporting a suicidal person in a remote environment the recommendation is to ask if anyone else is with them and if they are then ask to speak with that person. If the suicidal person is alone, ask for permission to contact a family member. If the person refuses, hangs up the phone or ends the webchat you may need to call 000 to request a welfare check.

### Looking After Yourself When Working Remotely

As Mental Health First Aiders we encourage people to access support either with a professional, family member, friend, or local community support – we really should practice what we preach! If things get tough or challenging use your EAP sessions, that is what EAP is for, to help during difficult times. Self-care is essential to staying mentally well, even more so during uncertain times and significant changes in the way we live and work. Factor time during your day for regular breaks, doing things you enjoy, prioritising sleep and increasing good nutrition through the day.

Gain perspective – if you find yourself stuck or ruminating over issues then check out with a trusted colleague or friend their viewpoint, sometimes an alternative perspective can help us gain clarity. Create balance between work and home, be strict with yourself about switching of your computer, turning off your notifications and keeping work time away from family or leisure time.

### Sources:

- [www.headtohealth.gov.au](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au)
- Kitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM. Mental Health First Aid Manual. 4th ed. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2017
- [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
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