



## Mental Health First Aid for Students in the Health Professions: Exploring Opportunities for Experiential Learning in Higher Education

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course was developed almost fifteen years ago to enhance the support for people with mental health difficulties through training community members.<sup>3</sup> While the course has received much attention in mental health reforms, accreditation from Departments of Health, and high intake in national healthcare trusts and private businesses, the question of whether there are any benefits to students in health professions is unknown. In this editorial, we will explore the benefits of training healthcare professional students in MHFA not only for their education and development, but also for higher education institutions.

The MHFA course is an adaptation of physical first aid training that is in place for physiological health emergencies, and proposes a first point of contact to help people with a mental health problem or crisis. The advice that can be provided through MHFA is easily summarized through an *action plan* that is descriptive of the course (known as “ALGEE”): **A**pproach the person, **L**isten and assist with any crisis; **L**isten and communicate non-judgmentally; **G**ive support and information; **E**ncourage the person to get appropriate professional help; **E**ncourage other supports (see <sup>4</sup>).

The programme comprises evidence-based content, and shares expert consensus on new and appropriate material that could be used to enhance and support MHFA in various settings.<sup>1</sup> The course consists of 16 hours (over two days) including generic information around mental health, discrimination and stigma, and progresses with information on specific conditions including anxiety, personality, eating disorders psychosis, depression, suicide and self-harm. Further topic areas include use and misuse of alcohol and drugs, non-judgmental listening skills, recovery and resources, as well as self-care – all seen through the

ALGEE action plan in aiding help-seekers. The course incorporates interactive learning, for example presenting case studies of lived experiences of people with mental health difficulties, with opportunities for experiential, practical exercises for participants to gain proficiency in effective communication and support skills.

Findings have been positive in regards to the outcomes of the course. A meta-analysis showed that MHFA training increases mental health knowledge and helping behaviours, while reducing stigma around mental health.<sup>2</sup> More recently, a systematic review and meta-analysis revealed small to moderate effects post-training on recognizing, helping, and providing first aid.<sup>5</sup> MHFA training increases mental health awareness and support at the first instance of a mental health crisis, signposting individuals to local, current, relevant available support. People who train in MHFA are able to recognise mental health symptoms in their peers (whether this be face-to-face and/or through a nightline), they are more able to readily understand and empathise with student experience issues, and can provide appropriate, sensitive and timely signposting to self-care material and professional care services.

Health professions students are often a first point of contact for people when entering a healthcare setting; however, focused training around caring for people with mental health issues is often limited, or, focused on theoretical teaching due to the time demands of mandatory course requirements. The increasing prevalence of mental ill health, and how this can impact on effective care and treatment of physical health conditions is however an importune issue.

The MHFA course is short and easily accessible, offering the opportunity to practice skills that may be vital in their roles as health professionals such as active listening

and empathising with help-seekers. For programmes that are primarily considered as academic such as psychology, MHFA enhances the applied experiences, support and guidance, *such as listening to real lived experiences and understanding the complexity of signposting and treating people who may suffer from dual diagnosis (e.g., psychosis and drugs use)*, and these are skills that are not necessarily taught in core undergraduate psychology modules. While undergraduate health professions students are not in a position to conduct any therapy, or, suggest any specific interventions (and understanding and adhering to boundaries is an important element of the MHFA course), they are able to assist others who are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. To achieve this embedment in educational practice, training students and enabling them through an immediate placement to act as MHFA volunteers within the university is an optimal way of ensuring experiential learning. The possibility of paid posts for student MHFA co-ordinators, the leadership of student groups and the supervision by academics and counselling services within the institutions may offer a first vital step in increasing the engagement and influence of a scheme that has benefits in transforming the learning environment into a mental health immersed experience of professional development. Other short courses can be built around the MHFA course as well, such as *advanced counselling skills and health promotion*, in a supplementary attempt of engaging students, and offer further skills in professional development. Needless to say, such experiential learning may ease the path of accessing post-graduate courses that are practice-based for psychology students, and assist health profession students prior to any placement in health trusts in supporting people with mental health difficulties.

Embedding MHFA training into health professions programmes across multiple universities has the potential to create a hugely positive impact on perceptions and understandings around mental health both nationally and internationally, reducing stigma and barriers to ‘speaking up’, and readily available information for timely and effective treatment. The additional potential of enhancing communication skills with patients, and increasing the likelihood of recognising mental illness, and subsequently engaging in best practice are elements that could benefit all patients and indeed health professionals themselves, as at times they are at increasing risk of experiencing mental

health problems themselves. Pedagogically it is transformational for health professions education, while there is the potential to maximise retention and progression, and enhance the student experience of all students in higher education. In essence, the impact of MHFA undergraduates in higher education may create populations of healthier students who achieve higher, healthier and more successful graduates, and prepare health professionals with hours of training and experience prior to entering any clinical placements or healthcare settings.

## References

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