

Mental Health First Aid Manual
Second Edition
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Mental health first aid is the help offered to a person who may be developing a mental health problem, or who is experiencing a mental health crisis. 'Being prepared' is a sound strategy. Many people in the community learn First Aid, and regularly update their knowledge and skills, 'just in case' they might one day need to provide assistance to someone who is ill or injured, and keep them safe until professional treatment can be accessed. Similarly, it is wise to 'be prepared' by learning how to offer and provide mental health first aid until appropriate professional help is received, or until the crisis resolves.

The Mental Health First Aid Manual, Second Edition, is an updated and expanded version of the original Mental Health First Aid Manual (Kitchener & Jorm, 2002), which sold around 10,000 copies in Australia. It was also adapted or translated in thirteen other countries. While the manual was written to accompany a 12 hour Mental Health First Aid course, it is also a self-contained resource, primarily designed to enable members of the public, who may have little or no prior mental health knowledge, to assist someone who may be developing mental illness, or who may be experiencing a mental health crisis. The first edition is regularly used by a range of health professionals, as well as in the training of medical, nursing, pharmacy and paramedical students. It has also been used as a training resource by Divisions of General Practice. The updated second edition, being more comprehensive than the original, with twice the number of pages and an even stronger research base, is expected

to be even more useful as a training resource. It is based on five years of research, using Delphi expert consensus studies, to develop international mental health first aid guidelines. These guidelines can be accessed online at <http://www.mhfa.com.au/Guidelines.shtml>

For such a comprehensive resource, the manual is surprisingly user-friendly. Divided into three main sections, the sub-headings and colour-coded format ensure that information can be located fast. The content is easy to read and clearly explained.

Section 1 defines mental health and presents information relating to the epidemiology and impact of mental illness in the Australian community. It also reports the spectrum of interventions, from prevention and early intervention to treatment and supports. The need for people in the community to be better informed about mental health problems is also covered.

Common myths and misunderstandings such as: 'only weak people have mental health problems' and 'people who have mental illnesses are dangerous' are discussed, as well as the impact of stigma and discrimination on the help-seeking behaviours of people with mental health problems. For instance, they may feel ashamed and try to hide their problems from family, friends, teachers or colleagues. Because of all the misconceptions in relation to mental illness, they may internalise the stigma and believe that the negative things that are said about people with mental health apply to them. They may be afraid to seek treatment due to concerns about what others may think if they find out. The authors cite the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, an Australia-wide community survey of 8,841 people aged 16-85, living in private dwellings, which found that one in five had a common mental illness (depression, anxiety and/or substance use disorder) at some time in the 12 months prior to the survey. Furthermore, only 35% of the people who had a mental illness in the previous year had received professional help. Section 1 also includes The Mental Health First Aid Action Plan. Just as with First Aid for physical illness

and injury, where the memorised mnemonic DRABC(D) – standing for Danger, Response, Airway, Breathing and Compressions (Defibrillation) - helps to remind us of the best plan of action in an emergency, so the acronym ALGEE enables us to remember the plan of action to assist a person who is experiencing a mental health crisis, or who may be developing mental health problems. A stands for ‘Approach, Assess and Assist’ the person with any crisis; L for ‘Listen’ non-judgmentally; G for ‘Give’ support and information; E for ‘Encourage’ the person to get appropriate professional help; and E for ‘Encourage’ other supports.

Section 2 relates to First Aid for developing mental health problems. Under the headings of Depression, Anxiety, Psychosis, and Substance Misuse, information is provided about types, risk factors, interventions, importance of early intervention, crises associated with the disorder, and helpful resources. A Mental Health First Aid Action Plan (in the form of ‘ALGEE’) applies for each, with additional, disorder-specific information on ‘what to do’ and ‘what not to do’. Having the same ‘Action Plan’ for each disorder makes it easier to remember what to do, as only the disorder-specific information needs to be separately memorised.

Section 3 covers First Aid for mental health crises, including ‘Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours’; ‘Non-suicidal Self-injury’; ‘Panic Attacks’; ‘Traumatic Events’; ‘Severe Psychotic States’; ‘Acute Effects of Alcohol Misuse’; ‘Acute Effects of Drug Misuse’; and ‘Aggressive Behaviours’.

Just as we never know when or if we will ever be called on to use our First Aid knowledge and skills in the event of a physical illness or injury, so we never know when or if we will find ourselves in a situation where we need to utilise our Mental Health First Aid knowledge and skills. Professional assistance is not always immediately available in an emergency.

The aims of every First Aid program are to preserve life; prevent further harm; promote recovery; and provide comfort. If we truly believe that mental health is at least as important as

physical health, then we need to ‘be prepared’ and ensure that a Mental Health First Aid Manual is sitting right alongside our other First Aid Manual on the bookshelf, at home and at work.