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A mindful course

ask kate

with
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I WAS recently speaking to an HR networking group when a member mentioned completing a mental health first-aid course.

The HR director told us how grateful he was he had attended the course prior to a member of staff getting very ill at work. "I wouldn't have had any idea of what to do otherwise," he says.

I had never heard of the course before and so did a little digging.

Turns out this award-winning course was developed in 2001 by Betty Kitchener and Professor Tony Jorm at the Centre for Mental Health Research based at the Australian National University. It has become an Aussie export and is now taught in 15 countries as well as around Australia.

I interviewed accredited trainer Catherine Fitzgerald to find out a bit more. Fitzgerald is based at the University of Western Sydney, which provides the training to its staff plus non-government organisations in the western Sydney area

The 12-hour course educates participants about how to provide first aid to someone until they can get appropriate professional health and or until a crisis is resolved.

The course covers the most common depression and anxiety disorders and other mental health issues as well as teaching people how to approach someone they suspect is ill, provide support and refer them to help.

Fitzgerald says participants tell her the course provides them with the confidence to talk to a colleague, family member or a friend they believe needs help.

According to federal government research, one in five people will

experience a mental health issue in any single year in Australia but

only 35 per cent of those 3.2 million people will seek help. This reluctance to get help makes it so important that workplaces are armed with knowledge about what to do and how to help.

The course improves participants' knowledge (about mental health) and their confidence in providing help, Fitzgerald says.

"They feel much more confident in approaching someone to provide help and refer them somewhere," she says.

"Many people who have done the course have stood up and said: 'This has helped me so much and not just at work but at home'.

"The knowledge and confidence participants gain also brings about a big shift in their belief (about mental illness) that drastically reduces stigma and discrimination."

Courses are available all over Australia so to find a course visit mhfa.com.au

Kate Southam is the editor of careerone.com.au. To submit a question or to find out more go to careerone.com.au

