



**MENTAL
HEALTH
FIRST AID**
Australia

Learn the skills to make a difference.



PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID IN THE TIME OF 'SOCIAL DISTANCING'

APRIL 2020

PROVIDING MHFA IN THE TIME OF 'SOCIAL DISTANCING'

Providing mental health first aid in the workplace, or elsewhere for that matter, can be challenging. The current social restrictions may add some additional challenges. Here are some tips that we hope you will find helpful in your role as a Mental Health First Aid Officer or Mental Health First Aider in the workplace or community.

TRY NOT TO GET OVERWHELMED

Don't let the task of supporting someone over the phone, video conferencing or web chat (text) overwhelm you. You have the training and skills necessary to support someone experiencing a mental health problem or crisis. Try to remain calm by using realistic self-talk, e.g. "I know how to provide mental health first aid", "This is new, but not impossible". If you think back to when you first did your MHFA training, you may recall that there were aspects of providing mental health first aid that seemed difficult at first, but you worked through those challenges, and you will work through these as well.

If someone is ready to have a talk about their mental health problems right now, they will probably be willing to try to do so over the phone or video conferencing software. Some may even find it less confronting than speaking to someone face to face.

LOOK FOR THE SIGNS

You know the signs of a mental health problem in the workplace, e.g. not meeting deadlines, withdrawal, working long hours to get usual workloads completed. However, if you are not regularly interacting with someone face to face, you may need to be more 'active' in noticing the signs.

Regular contact with team mates is important, as you will not be able to observe the signs through incidental contact. Some ways to do this are:

- Schedule regular touching base meetings. This can be daily or weekly, whatever works for you and your team.
- Have a 15-minute morning tea break with team mates or someone you think may struggle with the new working environment.
- If you are a manager, provide some structure for work tasks so that you will know if someone is struggling with their workload.

Observing non-verbal cues (like facial expressions, and body language) might be more difficult over the phone or video conference, so pay particular attention to tone and speech. For example, someone may be speaking really fast or taking more time than usual to express their thoughts.





If you're using web-chat technology (e.g. Slack) to have a mental health first aid conversation, take note of any emojis that are being used. This may be a way that the person chooses to engage with you about how they are feeling. Make sure you clarify how they are feeling, as emojis can mean different things to different people.

KNOW YOUR TECHNOLOGY

Become familiar with the technology available to you before the conversation so you can give your full attention to the person. If you experience technological failure, don't panic. If you need to call them back or switch to a different method of communication, do so.

At the beginning of the conversation, talk with the person about what you will do if the call drops out or you encounter some other technical problems, e.g. "I can call you on your mobile if the video call drops."

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

As with face to face mental health first aid, make sure that your conversation is private. This will require a bit more work and communication. Find out if the person is at home alone, or if a partner or children are at home as well. Ask if they can move to a more private area. If others are at home with you, move to another room and shut the door. Consider other options, for example you could take a walk 'together' and talk over the phone. (Just be extra careful to watch for traffic and trip hazards.)

Because it will not be as easy to pick up on cues, you may need to communicate about the process of the conversation more directly, e.g. ask the person if they would rather talk on the phone or use video conferencing software. Early in the conversation, discuss the fact that it may be more difficult for you to pick up on cues because you can't see them. Let them know you may need to be more direct in asking about how they are feeling. Ask them to tell you if the conversation becomes too distressing. You may need to work out ahead of time how they will do this, e.g. they may simply need to tell you they need a break or they may tell you they want to change topics.

LISTENING AND COMMUNICATING NON-JUDGEMENTALLY

Rely more heavily on your verbal skills to show you are listening and to convey empathy and acceptance. As a refresher, these are:

- Ask questions that show that you genuinely care and want clarification about what they are saying.
- Check your understanding by re-stating what they have said and summarising facts and feelings.
- Listen not only to what the person says, but how they say it by paying attention to their tone of voice.



*This information is taken from the Mental Health First Aid Guidelines *Helping someone with mental health problems and financial problems: Guidelines for financial counsellors* and the collective practice-based evidence from the Mental Health First Aid Australia team.

- Use minimal prompts, such as “I see” and “Ah” when necessary to keep the conversation going.
- Be patient, particularly when the person may not be communicating well, may be repetitive or may be speaking slower and less clearly than usual.
- Do not be critical or express your frustration at the person.
- Try not interrupt the person when they are speaking.

Empathy can be conveyed through your tone of voice and taking the time to listen. You can express empathy verbally (“I can imagine that this is a really difficult time for you”) and also in how you communicate or by expressing that you are seeking to understand what might be going on for them.

You may need to be more direct in your conversations and ask more questions than usual to really understand what is going on for the person. If you are providing support via webchat or texting, it will be especially important to ask clarifying questions to be sure you have understood them.

Pauses and silences are okay but can be more awkward over the phone. Think about whether the silence is awkward, or just awkward for you.

Practice conversations with other Mental Health First Aiders in your workplace via the phone or video conferencing and share experiences and learnings with each other. Remember to maintain confidentiality.

IF THE PERSON BECOMES HIGHLY DISTRESSED OR IS IN CRISIS

If a conversation becomes too distressing for the person and they feel they need to end the conversation, seek permission to check in with them at a later time. If the person becomes highly distressed, try to find out where they are. If there is a risk of harm to themselves or others, you may need to contact emergency services. Try to have another device available, e.g. if using video calls, have your phone close by so that you can easily contact emergency services if you need to. Before ending the call, try to put a safety plan in place, e.g. they will contact Lifeline if things get too difficult, or they will call a friend or family member to have a chat. If appropriate to the relationship, send the person a text after the call to let them know you are thinking of them and available should they need to talk. Be prepared with contacts for tele-health services that are available to the person, e.g. GP, and crisis lines, such as Suicide Call-back Service (1300 659 467), and Lifeline (13 11 14).

SELF-CARE

Helping someone with mental health problems can be stressful and providing mental health first aid in these new ways may add to this stress. Remember to look after yourself - eat healthily, drink plenty of water, get enough sleep, exercise, meditate, be mindful, be kind.