

The role of the Mental Health First Aider

Mental Health First Aid

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an internationally recognised training course, designed to teach people how to spot the signs and symptoms of mental ill health and provide help on a first aid basis. In the same way as learning physical first aid, MHFA teaches people how to recognise those crucial warning signs of mental ill health and feel confident to guide someone to appropriate support. Embedding MHFA training within any organisation or community also encourages people to talk more freely about mental health, reducing stigma and creating a more positive culture.

Becoming a Mental Health First Aider

To become a Mental Health First Aider you must complete a two day MHFA course. This is our most comprehensive awareness and skills course, which includes a mix of presentations, discussions and group work activities. For more information on the course content, please visit mhfaengland.org.

Every MHFA course is delivered by a quality assured instructor who has completed our Instructor Training programme accredited by the Royal Society for Public Health.

Anyone can attend an MHFA course but an interest in mental health and wellbeing is desirable. When you have completed the course, you will receive a certificate to confirm that you are a trained Mental Health First Aider and a fold-out card summarising the five-step MHFA action plan to carry with you.

Outcomes and benefits

The course will:

- Give a deeper understanding of the issues that impact on and relate to people's mental health
- Teach practical skills that can be used every day, including being able to spot the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and feel confident guiding people towards support

Independent research and evaluation shows that taking part in an MHFA course:

- Raises awareness and mental health literacy
- Reduces stigma around mental health
- Boosts knowledge and confidence in dealing with mental health issues
- Promotes early intervention which enables recovery

The role

In general, the role of a Mental Health First Aider in the workplace is to be a point of contact for an employee who is experiencing a mental health issue or emotional distress. This interaction could range from having an initial conversation through to supporting the person to get appropriate help. As well as in a crisis, Mental Health First Aiders are valuable in providing early intervention help for someone who may be developing a mental health issue.

Mental Health First Aiders are not trained to be therapists or psychiatrists but they can offer initial support through non-judgemental listening and guidance.

Mental Health First Aiders are trained to:

- Spot the early signs and symptoms of mental ill health
- Start a supportive conversation with a colleague who may be experiencing a mental health issue or emotional distress
- Listen to the person non-judgementally
- Assess the risk of suicide or self-harm
- Encourage the person to access appropriate professional support or self-help strategies. This might include encouraging access to internal support systems such as EAPs or in-house counselling services
- Escalate to the appropriate emergency services, if necessary
- Maintain confidentiality as appropriate
- Protect themselves while performing their role

At no time does the Mental Health First Aider role (or anyone trained in MHFA skills) supersede company policy: first and foremost they are all employees of the company.

Considerations

Just as a company has policies and procedures in place covering what employees need to do if you suspect someone is at risk (for example, where the first step is always to escalate for advice and support), we advise putting together a policy document to outline your organisation's approach to MHFA.

Who should go on an MHFA course?

MHFA courses are open to all but as an organisation you might want to consider the following when deciding which employees should attend the training:

- Do they have a desire to learn more about mental health and support others if required to do so?
- Will they be provided with the required time and support to attend the training and fulfil their role once trained?
- Do they have line management responsibilities which could benefit from the training?

Supporting your Mental Health First Aiders

Internal support is very important to successfully embed Mental Health First Aiders into an organisation. Every organisation will have a different approach to how they support their Mental Health First Aiders but here are some examples of support strategies which have proven successful:

- Setting up networks (with a clear remit) for support and idea sharing (perhaps overseen by someone with a HR background)
- Putting in place a Mental Health First Aider role and policy document to ensure clarity on expectations
- Empowering Mental Health First Aiders to maintain their skills with regular refresher skills training. The recommended gap is two years, in line with physical first aid training
- Develop and promote clear referral or assistance pathways so Mental Health First Aiders can signpost effectively to support
- Increase mental health literacy across the rest of the organisation to help normalise the conversation around mental health

Promoting your Mental Health First Aiders

It is a good idea to make employees aware of who the trained Mental Health First Aiders are within the organisation so that they know who to approach if they are experiencing mental health issues. Again, how each organisation approaches this can be different but the following ideas can be considered:

- Include Mental Health First Aiders' identities alongside the physical first aiders' identities at key places within the office, perhaps at the photocopying stations or kitchen areas
- Include a list of Mental Health First Aiders with name, photograph and contact details on the intranet
- Provide Mental Health First Aiders lanyards or badges for easy identification

Measuring impact

We recommend identifying some KPIs to ensure you can measure the impact and outcomes of your investment in MHFA. These could be a mix of anecdotal evidence and data, for example:

- Number of people accessing EAP or other organisational assistance programmes of support
- Rate of sickness absence and return to work – ideally tracked both before and after MHFA training has been introduced
- Staff surveys and evaluations following MHFA training sessions
- Percentage of people trained who have applied what they learned on the MHFA course
- Percentage of managers feeling more confident speaking to employees about mental health in the workplace
- Percentage increase in employees who would feel comfortable speaking to their line manager about mental health

Strategic approach

MHFA training is most effective when integrated as part of a strategic approach to wellbeing. You should consider how you can:

- Position mental health as a boardroom issue, on a par with physical health
- Promote and communicate wellbeing as a key driver for productivity and maximising performance

- Make employee wellbeing a core part of line manager job responsibilities and provide appropriate time, resource and training so they can support the staff they manage
- Recruit, promote and support line managers with excellent interpersonal skills
- Support line managers to maintain their own wellbeing
- Develop and promote clear referral or assistance pathways so managers can take appropriate action to support employees