

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

A USEFUL TOOL TO ADD TO YOUR OVERALL STRATEGY FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE!



WHO THE TOOL IS FOR:

The person responsible for implementing the process (HR).

OBJECTIVES OF THIS DOCUMENT:

- Define and understand the mental health first aid program
- Explore how to implement a mental health first aid strategy

CONTEXT

Today, mental health issues are at the top of the list of risks facing organizations. In Canada alone, 30% of disability claims are due to mental health issues, and account for 70% of all disability-related costs (CAMH, 2020). With this in mind, health and wellness programs are needed now more than ever. That's why many companies are improving their current offerings in this area. In this context, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training plays a major role.

DID YOU KNOW?

According to the WHO and the ILO, **12 billion workdays would be lost each year around the world because of depression or anxiety.** This costs the global economy around 1 trillion dollars.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Started in Australia in 2000, MHFA is now global with over 4 million people in 25 countries having done the training to date. They are trained to recognize and offer immediate support to any of their colleagues in distress. After a short course, usually 2 days, they are not MH professionals but are there more like friends, to listen to, acknowledge and validate their colleagues' experiences. They are not expected to provide solutions, though just having a chance to talk freely and get a better perspective on events and feelings may be all that is needed for some. Others may need to be signposted to sources of ongoing support. MH First Aiders are also a useful resource for promoting positive MH, for example through involvement in events to mark Mental Health Week.

HOW SHOULD MH FIRST AIDERS BE CHOSEN?

The success of the MHFA program very much depends on selecting the right people to take on this role. They must be empathetic and caring, interested in others and outgoing and

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

A USEFUL TOOL TO ADD TO YOUR OVERALL STRATEGY FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE!



confident enough to approach colleagues, even those they don't know well, if they think support is needed. Some people are attracted to the role due to their own experience of poor mental health, which may give them additional insight into these issues, but may also make them more vulnerable to psychological harm. It is important that, before undertaking the training, they are well on the way to recovery from their own issues and that they are well supported throughout. Publishing a clear job description so that potential MH First Aiders fully understand what the role involves, as set out in the MHFA guide, and involving managers in the selection process, perhaps by signing off the application for training, will help ensure that the right people are in post.

HOW SHOULD MH FIRST AIDERS BE SUPPORTED?

The training is only the beginning and MH First Aiders cannot be left unsupported. Consider regular meetings to discuss any issues and share best practice, either face to face or by video, or as numbers increase, local hubs led by the most experienced members of the MHFA network. A shared intranet space will allow access to useful resources and provide a forum for discussion of any difficult issues or questions. It should also host a log of interventions, suitably anonymized, detailing the basis of the discussion and the outcomes, including any support offered. This will have the dual purpose of providing a record so that usefulness can be demonstrated but also act as a learning tool for new team members. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) may also be able to offer specialist support to any MH First Aider who feels overwhelmed or unsure.

WHAT ELSE IS REQUIRED FOR A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH?

MHFA is not the complete answer. As an HSE study demonstrated, while there is consistent evidence that MHFA training raises employees' awareness of mental ill-health conditions, including signs and symptoms, there is no evidence that the introduction of MHFA training has improved the organisational management of MH in the workplace. For this a robust, multi-layered, holistic and sustained MH strategy, as defined by Cary Cooper, is needed, with MHFA as just one component. This strategy could include:

- **Full use of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or psychological helpline.** Many are underused, either because employees don't know they exist or don't trust them not to share information with their employer. Maximum publicity by all means possible, including posters, e-mails, wallet cards, intranet, etc. will help, as will emphasising the confidentiality rules which are in force. Ensure they supply anonymized feedback to help understanding of the needs and problem areas within the organization and ask whether they offer some training e.g. webinars or specific support for MH First Aiders or managers.

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

A USEFUL TOOL TO ADD TO YOUR OVERALL STRATEGY FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE!

- **Manager training** to help them understand their role in designing healthy jobs and managing psychological risks, using the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management of Stress Standards for example. They should also know how to recognise and support a team member in difficulty, as explained in Global-Watch's toolkit Mitigating psychological health risks in times of uncertainty and access the resources available, including MH First Aiders and the EAP.
- **Webinars on relevant topics** such as stress management, sleep, neurodiverse issues such as autism or dyslexia, domestic violence will all help to raise awareness and promote openness.
- **Encouragement of blogs from employees** who have experienced difficulties, including MH issues, explaining how they felt and what helped them to recover. They can be anonymized if needed but are still very powerful.
- **Publicity and events surrounding particular dates** such as Stress Awareness Day.

HOW CAN THE IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDERS BE EVALUATED?

This is difficult as the benefits, though real, may be intangible. However, one could consider sickness absence and the return to work rate, as well as attraction and retention rates. The log as described above, of the number of conversations MH First Aiders are having and the support provided, will yield valuable information, including identifying any key themes. Uptake of any support offered especially by the EAP can be monitored. Finally consider subjective feedback from managers who have MH First Aiders in their teams, from the MH First Aiders themselves or from their colleagues.

TOOL DEVELOPED BY ANNE BARLETT

Global-Watch contributor in the United Kingdom



TO REFER TO THIS TOOL: © 2024 Global-Watch.com™. *Mental Health First Aid: a useful tool to add to your overall strategy for mental health and well-being in the workplace!* www.global-watch.com.

PERMITTED USE : Distribution of tool "as is" permitted within your organization