



**Opening  
Minds**

MENTAL HEALTH  
COMMISSION  
OF CANADA

# Providing Mental Health First Aid to an Employee

A Guide for Managers



## Purpose

Mental Health First Aid is defined as the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem, experiencing the worsening of an existing mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional help is received or until the crisis resolves.

This guide provides tips, considerations and insights to help managers provide mental health first aid to their employees. While this guide offers stand-alone tools for managers, it is recommended to take a Mental Health First Aid course.

## Development

The information in this guide is based on the opinions of people with lived experience of mental health problems in the workplace, managers with experience supervising employees with mental health problems, and workplace mental health professionals. The experts were from Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

## Implementation

Everyone is unique and it is important to tailor your support to that person's needs. Therefore, these recommendations may not be appropriate for every person. They are also designed for developed English-speaking countries and may not be suitable for other cultural groups or for countries with different health systems.

This guide was developed by Mental Health First Aid Australia and adapted for the Canadian perspective.

\*For the purposes of this guide, managers, including supervisors, team leaders, directors, and senior leaders, include all those in positions where they are directing or supervising the work of another.

## Mental Health in the Workplace

Mental health issues are common in the workplace and can affect performance, due to problems with concentration, memory, decision-making and motivation. While some people with mental health issues manage without impact on their work performance, others may require short-term or ongoing workplace support. In most cases, this support improves work performance.

Investing time and effort to retain an experienced and skilled employee with a mental health problem is usually more cost-effective than recruiting and training a new person. (Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation. *A Win-Win Proposition: The Business Case for Actively Recruiting and Retaining People with Episodic Disabilities*. 2014. [www.realizecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Business-Case-for-Actively-Recruiting-and-Retaining-People\\_with\\_Episodic\\_Disabiliti.pdf](http://www.realizecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Business-Case-for-Actively-Recruiting-and-Retaining-People_with_Episodic_Disabiliti.pdf) 16 June 2017.)

Work can be beneficial or harmful to mental health, depending on the circumstances. For some people living with a mental health problem, being at work in a supportive environment can assist recovery. The level of support needed will fluctuate, as the indicators of most mental health issues come and go over time.

If you notice changes in a co-worker's work or interactions with others that may indicate a mental health problem, it is important to discuss these changes with them, whether or not work is a contributing factor.

## Potential Behaviours and Physical/Physiological Indicators

When an employee is showing possible indicators of a mental health problem, Mental Health First Aid can help them return to their usual performance quickly. Without the support of effective intervention, the problem could worsen or a crisis could emerge.

Possible behaviours:

- Not getting things done
- Erratic behaviour
- Emotional responses
- Complaints about a lack of management support
- Fixation with fair treatment issues
- Complaints of not coping with workload
- Appearing withdrawn
- Reduced participation in work activities
- Increased consumption of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes, sedatives, etc.
- Being indecisive
- Inability to concentrate
- Increased errors or accidents
- Loss of confidence
- Unplanned absences
- Conflict with team members or manager
- Use of grievance procedures
- Difficulty with memory

## Possible Physical/Physiological Indicators

- Tired all the time
- Sick and run down
- Headaches
- Persistent or resistant musculoskeletal complaints
- Reduced reaction times
- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight loss or gain
- Disheveled appearance
- Gastro-intestinal disorders

## Consideration of Context and Circumstance

Consider whether the behaviours you have observed may be due to other factors, such as workplace culture or interpersonal dynamics rather than mental health issues. If you are aware that the person has a history of mental health issues, you should not assume their moods, behaviours or any poor performance are necessarily due to these problems.

The employee may be experiencing normal human reactions to life circumstances rather than indicators of mental illness. Providing mental health first aid in this context can still be beneficial as it can help the employee give themselves permission to experience and forgive understandable human fragility.

## Crisis Situations & How to Help

If an employee is distressed, it is important not to ignore them – doing nothing can make the situation worse. Where appropriate to the circumstances and your work role, consider reading MHFA's tips for helping a distressed employee which can be found on our website: [www.mhfa.ca/en/workplace/workplace-programs](http://www.mhfa.ca/en/workplace/workplace-programs).

You can also visit the Mental Health Commission of Canada's Workplace webpage at: [www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/focus-areas/workplace](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/focus-areas/workplace) and their YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/1MHCC>.

## Deciding Who Should Approach

Some questions that can help you determine whether you are the right person to make the approach are:

- Do you have the appropriate knowledge and skills to help?
- Do you have any negative experiences, attitudes or beliefs towards people with mental health issues?
- Are you part of a workplace culture that is contributing to the employee's mental health problem?

### **If not you, then who?**

If you decide it is not appropriate for you to make the approach, consider discussing the situation with someone in a better position to help and ask them to approach the person. If you seek advice from others, it is important that you maintain the person's privacy and confidentiality and encourage all those involved to do the same.

You can also consider contacting an impartial, external source of support for advice such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) helpline, or dial 211 for information on government and community based health and social services (available across Canada except Yukon, North West Territories, Newfoundland or Prince Edward Island).

## Examples of appropriate knowledge and skill

Mental Health First Aid training will provide information about:

- mental health problems;
- the importance of early identification, help-seeking and available support services; and
- how to watch out for and approach someone when you are concerned about their mental health.

Additional training should also provide you, as a manager, with knowledge and skills relating to:

- mental health in the workplace;
- management styles and practices that promote good mental health;
- what to do if an employee refuses to seek help;
- how to deal with under-performance issues when mental health problems are involved; and
- how to take action when an employee reports a health and safety risk to themselves or others.

## Planning Your Approach

1. Document any concerning behaviours you have noticed.
2. Plan what you want to say; consider possible context and outcomes.
3. Research available resources that support people living with mental health issues, e.g. EAP or similar.
4. Examine relevant laws and organizational policies and procedures, such as accommodating employees with mental health issues and anti-discrimination guidelines.
5. Learn how to take action and seek help when someone talks about suicide: <http://suicideprevention.ca/need-help/im-concerned-about-someone/>

## Picking a Suitable Time and Place

- Pick a time and place to meet that best suits you and the person.
- You should have the conversation in a neutral private space and ensure the meeting place is free of distractions and interruptions – switch off mobile devices.
- Ease into the conversation by first asking if they are okay.
- Allow ample time for your discussion.

## Having the Discussion: Listening and Communicating Non-Judgmentally

### **Confidentiality**

You should maintain confidentiality and privacy except where there is a concern for the safety of the person or others. For example, even within a management team, it is not okay to tell a fellow manager about an employee's mental health unless consent has been given.

Be clear about the limits of confidentiality. Do this early in your conversation by discussing and agreeing on the limits of confidentiality and who will be told what, e.g. when needing advice from Workplace Health and Safety, Human Resources or others.

### **Building Trust**

It is important to create a supportive and trusting environment when discussing changes in behaviour. There are several ways to do this:

- Sit an appropriate distance away, taking into account personal space.
- Engage with the person by using culturally appropriate eye contact.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Allow the person time to talk.
- Listen non-judgmentally, and demonstrate empathy and respect.

You don't need to have all the answers; it's more important to be motivated by genuine concern than to say the "right things". Stop and try again if what you say doesn't sound quite right - it doesn't have to be the end of the conversation. Listen if the person is willing to discuss their problems. If the person has opened up and shared their story, you should express your appreciation.

### **When Talking with the Person**

When talking with the person, you should describe the specific reasons for your concern. Express your concerns in a non-confrontational and clear manner, using examples of what you feel are the concerning changes.

State changes you have observed in a positive way:

"I have noticed that you are not your usual cheery self" or "you seem less energetic".

Ask questions in an open and exploratory way:

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been arriving late recently and wondered if there was a problem?”

If the person discloses that they have a mental health problem, you should ask what impact it is having. You could also ask if there are any non-work-related issues they may like to discuss. If you are unsure about what terminology to use, ask the person what terms they would prefer.

**Ask the person whether any workplace stressors or other issues are contributing to the mental health problem.** Not all workplace stressors affect everyone in the same way. If the person says that workplace stressors are a factor, you should offer to help find appropriate information and support.

**Encourage the use of any coping strategies that have helped in the past.** If the person has a relapse management plan, follow the instructions. Have a discussion about supporting the person’s existing coping strategies. Make sure the person is aware of any relevant organizational supports (e.g., EAP or similar), as well as supports outside of work that may be helpful.

**Consider workplace accommodations.** If the employee is having difficulties with their performance because of their mental health problem, ask if they need an accommodation and be prepared to explain the concept of “workplace accommodations” (see below).

### What are workplace accommodations?

Workplace accommodations refer to changes to the work environment that allow a person with a diagnosed mental illness to work safely and productively. According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission employers have a duty to accommodate: [www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/duty-accommodate](http://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/duty-accommodate)

Examples of accommodations include: a quiet space for reviewing and adjusting to the performance requirements of the job, arranging flexible work hours, providing work tasks in writing, etc. Many employees will not need accommodation and some may only require minor changes.



**At the end of the conversation, you should both agree about what will happen next and who will take action.** If you feel distressed after the conversation, you should find someone to talk to for support and advice, while maintaining privacy. Remember that your actions may still make a difference, even if expectations are not met – the person will have spoken to you about the mental health problem and may be encouraged to seek further help.

### **What if I'm not the right person to help?**

If while talking with the person, you decide that you are not the right person to help, tell them this and discuss alternative sources of help. You can also offer to seek the immediate assistance of someone with appropriate training, e.g. a Mental Health First Aider or through a mental health professional or a related service.

### **What if the person doesn't want to talk?**

There are many reasons why a person would or would not disclose mental health issues at work (to read more on the implications of disclosing, visit the 'Resources for MHFA in the workplace' section of our website: [www.mhfa.ca/en/workplace/workplace-programs](http://www.mhfa.ca/en/workplace/workplace-programs)).

Be prepared for the possibility that the person may not accept your support. Remain calm if the person reacts in a negative way, such as with denial or anger. Try not to take it personally if they don't want to talk. Respect the person's wishes to not discuss non-work related issues.

If the person chooses not to talk, explain that you are available to talk in the future and encourage him or her to talk to someone else they trust instead. You could also provide information for the person to take away and look at later. You should also touch base with the person at a later time to see if they are more willing to talk.

## Tips for what to do/not to do during the discussion with your employee:

### **What to do:**

- Let other employees know it is inappropriate to talk about the details of the person's mental health issues in an unhelpful way.
- Talk about the employee's strengths and how they are valued.
- Emphasize your concern for the person's well-being, rather than their work performance, and keep this as the focus of the discussion.
- After raising your concerns with the person, ask if they would like to continue the conversation in the presence of a support person, e.g. an external advocate, co-worker.

## What not to do:

- Start the conversation by talking about how your own personal struggles have affected your work behaviour.
- Make the person talk about their mental health problem if they aren't ready.
- Ask questions that create pressure like "What's wrong with you?" or "Are you stressed or something?"
- Rush in with another question without listening to the answer.
- Diagnose the person with a mental illness or use diagnostic terminology unless the person uses it.
- Try to act as a counsellor, tell the person what to do or offer the person remedies or treatments.
- Tell the person that they need to stay busy, get out more, "snap out of it" or "get your act together".
- Be patronizing, blame, accuse, treat the person as an invalid or embarrass the person by saying things like "everyone is noticing..."
- Assume the person's problems will just go away.
- Minimize the person's problems by comparing them to your own problems or those of other people.
- Say "I've had the same experience" unless you have.
- Make assumptions about whether any work absence is "genuine".
- Minimize the problems the person may encounter as a result of their mental health problem.
- Use stigmatizing language when talking about the person, e.g. "people with schizophrenia" is preferable to "schizophrenics"; "people with substance use problems" is preferable to "addicts".
- Label the person's mental health issues as bad behaviour, e.g. referring to a person who is frequently late as lazy.