

# KEY ELEMENTS OF MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

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## Key Messages:

- Extensive research underpins the development of mental health first aid guidelines
- The whole of the community can play a role in supporting people with mental health problems by learning mental health first aid skills.
- The basic skills of mental health first aid are summarized by the ALGEE Action Plan.

Mental health first aid is 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. There are basic mental health first aid skills that can be learned by anyone in the community and should be seen as part of the responsibility of every person to care for others in their community.

## How do we know what to do?

Every person in the world has close contact with people with mental health problems, whether among their family, friends, workplace or neighbourhood. How they behave towards those people may have an important role in their recovery. But how do we know what actions to take that will be supportive and not make the problem worse?

To find out, extensive research has been carried out to develop international best-practice mental health first aid guidelines.<sup>1-7</sup> These are based on the consensus of international panels of experts. The experts are people who either work as mental health professionals or have lived experience of mental illness themselves or as a family carer. These guidelines have now been developed for a wide range of developing mental

illnesses (depression, psychosis, substance misuse, eating disorders, gambling problems, confusion and dementia) and for mental health crises (such as helping a person who is suicidal, self-injuring, having a panic attack or having had a traumatic experience).

Copies of these guidelines are available for free download from the Mental Health First Aid International website ([www.mhfa.com.au](http://www.mhfa.com.au)). Research has found that people who download the guidelines do actually find them helpful and can use them to improve the support they provide to someone with a mental health problem.<sup>8</sup>

## The ALGEE Action Plan

Across all of the different guidelines, some key elements come through consistently. These have been summarized as a Mental Health First Aid Action Plan, with the acronym ALGEE.<sup>9</sup> Some people may not find 'ALGEE' easy to remember, so Mental Health First Aid international has created a koala mascot called Algee to make it more memorable. The five actions in the plan are below.



**Mental Health First Aid ACTION PLAN**

Mental Health First Aid is the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem, experiencing a 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.

- Approach, assess and assist with any crisis**
  - If you are worried about someone and want to talk to them about it, carefully consider the time and place that you will **APPROACH** them about it.
  - **ASSESS** for signs of crisis, and **ASSIST** the person if they are in crisis.
- Listen non-judgementally**
  - A person experiencing a mental health problem needs to be able to talk without feeling judged.
  - **LISTEN** non-judgementally & show the person that you care.
- Give support and information**
  - Give the person whatever **SUPPORT** you are able to, whether emotional or practical.
  - Give the person **INFORMATION** that can help them understand what they are experiencing. Good websites and factsheets are available.
- Encourage appropriate professional help**
  - Mental health problems can be effectively treated with both medical and psychological therapies.
  - **ENCOURAGE** the person to speak to their doctor or a mental health professional about what they have been experiencing.
- Encourage other supports**
  - **ENCOURAGE** the person to use self-help strategies and to avoid using alcohol or other drugs to cope.
  - **ENCOURAGE** the person to seek the support of family, friends and others.

VISIT: [www.mhfainternational.org](http://www.mhfainternational.org)



A free app with the Action Plan is available for both iPhone and Android from <https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-downloads>.

### **Action 1: Approach the person, assess and assist with any crisis**

The first task is to approach the person, look out for any crises and assist the person in dealing with them. The key points are to:

- Approach the person about your concerns
- Find a suitable time and space where you both feel comfortable
- If the person does not initiate a conversation with you about how they are feeling, you should say something to them
- Respect the person's privacy and confidentiality.

In a situation involving a person with a mental health problem, the possible crises are that:

- The person may harm themselves, e.g. by attempting suicide, by using substances to become intoxicated or by engaging in non-suicidal self-injury;
- The person experiences extreme distress, e.g. a panic attack, a traumatic event or a severe psychotic state;
- The person's behaviour is very disturbing to others, e.g. they become aggressive or lose touch with reality.

If the first aider has no concerns that the person is in crisis, they can ask the person about how they are feeling and how long they have been feeling that way and move on to Action 2.

### **Action 2: Listen non-judgmentally**

Listening to the person is a very important action. When listening, it is important to set aside any judgments made about the person or their situation, and avoid expressing those judgments. Most people who are experiencing distressing emotions and thoughts want to be listened to empathetically before being offered options and resources that may help them. When listening non-judgmentally, the first aider needs to adopt certain attitudes and use verbal and non-verbal listening skills that:

- Allow the listener to really hear and understand what is being said to them, and
- Make it easier for the other person to feel they can talk freely about their problems without being judged.

It is important to listen non-judgmentally at all times when providing mental health first aid.

### **Action 3: Give support and information**

Once a person with a mental health problem has felt listened to, it can be easier for the first aider to offer support and information. The support to offer at the time includes emotional support, such as empathising with how they feel and giving them the hope of recovery, and practical help with tasks that may seem overwhelming at the moment. Also, the first aider can ask the person whether they would like some information about mental health problems.

### **Action 4: Encourage the person to get appropriate professional help**

The first aider can also tell a person about any options available to them for help and support. A person with mental health problems will generally have a better recovery with appropriate professional help. However, they may not know about the various options that are available to them, such as medication, counselling or psychological therapy, support for family members, assistance with vocational and educational goals, and assistance with income and accommodation.

### **Action 5: Encourage other supports**

Encourage the person to use self-help strategies and to seek the support of family, friends and others. Other people who have experienced mental health problems can also provide valuable help in the person's recovery.

### **Learning more through a Mental Health First Aid training course**

While everyone can apply basic mental health first aid strategies from reading the action plan and downloading the guidelines, the best way to improve skills is through doing a Mental Health First Aid training course. These courses are now available in many countries. Research shows that Mental Health First Aid training improves trainees' knowledge, reduces stigma and increases helping behaviours.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Mental health problems are very common in communities across the world. Inevitably, everyone will either develop one themselves or have close contact with someone who does. Every member of the community can play a useful role in assisting the recovery of people with mental health problems by learning basic mental health first aid skills.

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