**Mental Health First Aid: For Adults Who Interact With Youth**

Information adapted from MHFA course originally developed at the Center for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University in Canberra.

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Group leaders and/or other adults taking part in a youth exchange are not expected to be a therapist, you are however responsible for ensuring the youth’s safety, and can support youth in a multitude of ways. As such, you may need an understanding of basic mental health first aid actions. It is also important to determine your local school/organization guidelines for a mental health problem or crisis.

# What is Mental Health First Aid?

Mental health first aid (MHFA) is the help provided to a person developing a mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis is resolved.

Mental health influences how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interpret events. It affects our capacity to learn, communicate, and form, sustain or end relationships. It also influences our ability to cope with change, transition and life events, such as going to a new school, moving to a new home or experiencing bereavement.

# The Five Basic Actions of MHFA

1. **Assess the risk of suicide and/or harm:** evaluate the situation to decide how best to help the youth. It is important to reduce or remove any risk that is present. Do not be afraid to ask direct and specific questions to assess the situation. e.g.: Do you have a plan of what you might do to kill yourself?
2. **Listen non-judgementally:** adopt a set of attitudes and listening skills (verbal and non- verbal) that allow you to hear and understand what is being said and enable the youth to talk freely and comfortably about problems without feeling that they are being judged. Remember to stay calm and patient. Ask about what they need, what they are feeling, and what you can do to help.
3. **Give reassurance and information:** help the youth feel hope and optimism, realize that people care about them, that there are supports and treatments available, and that they can realize a vision for a better life. (Remember to be culturally sensitive around referring to types of treatments). Do not assume or make judgments about possible mental health diagnoses.
4. **Encourage the young person to get appropriate professional help:** Help the youth to identify the most appropriate professional person/service that can help for their particular mental health issue, and encourage them to access that help.
5. **Encourage other supports:** Help the youth find ways to help themselves through self- help strategies or by reaching out to family, friends and other supports. You may also provide resources about local warm lines and crisis lines, especially if the youth lacks a close social support network.

The five actions of MHFA are not necessarily steps to be followed in a set order. You must use judgment about the order of these actions and be flexible and responsive to the youth you are helping.

It is important to take appropriate action and arrange for professional help if someone is at serious risk of harming themselves or someone else.

Ensure that youth have agency and space to decide with you what supports would work best for them and help ensure their safety. However, at times they may not want any help and you may still need to call for professional help. This may be a mental health professional, but could include emergency medical services, the police or other professionals.

Supporting a youth through a crisis may be quite scary and stressful. Enlist the help of other trusted group leaders, supervisors, etc where appropriate, and ensure you have the space and support to navigate the situation and better help the youth.

# Ways of Recognizing a Mental Health Crisis: This is beyond the normally expected reaction that youth may exhibit taking part in a youth exchange program. (homesickness, culture shock …)

**Isolation** – If a youth starts keeping themselves isolated from the group and/or peers; refusing to engage in any activities; showing signs that you believe are severe

**Anger** – If youth shows signs of tension and hostility towards a real or perceived threat to themselves, their possessions, rights or values, then anxiety is most likely to blame.

**Personality Changes** – Has there been a shift in the youth’s way of thinking? Changes are normal but if you suddenly notice an undesired or uncomfortable change in personality, it may be indicative of a serious condition.

**Poor Self Care** –You certainly cannot control all the circumstances that life throws your way, but despite tough times, you must take care of yourself properly. You must eat, cleanse and get the proper amount of sleep. Youth in distress often cannot care for themselves. Is this happening to any of the youth?

Lack of sleep may contribute to a mental health crisis, helping youth get enough sleep can help calm and/or prevent the crisis. Ensuring there is plenty of time and space for rest during the exchange may help with this.

**Hopelessness** – If you notice a youth is expressing a sense of hopelessness that reflects a negative view of the future. They are expressing that they truly believe NOTHING will get better.

Adapted from: [**https://www.sheppardpratt.org/blog/5-ways-recognize-mental-health-crisis/**](https://www.sheppardpratt.org/blog/5-ways-recognize-mental-health-crisis/) **Other resources:**

You will find numerous resources on mental health as well as information on how to support someone dealing with a mental health crisis. https://jack.org/Home