

MEDIA RELEASE

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Bringing 'mental health first aid officers' to the workplace

ALTHOUGH trained first aiders are commonplace in many workplaces, the concept of a 'mental health first aid officer' is still very much in its infancy in Australia, says Mental First Aid Australia Deputy CEO, Nataly Bovopoulos.

This is despite the fact that more than six million Australians take sick leave every year due to mental illness,¹ with an estimated \$10.9 billion being lost annually through absenteeism, reduced productivity and compensation claims² as a result of untreated mental health problems.

"While there is a growing recognition by workplaces of the impact of mental health problems and an increase in awareness-raising initiatives and support for employees, not enough is being done to equip staff with the necessary skills to rapidly respond to a colleague in crisis or detect the early signs and symptoms of a mental health problem," says Ms Bovopoulos.

"Essentially, more needs to be done to help employees play an active role in supporting their co-workers and to respond appropriately when circumstance dictates."

She believes the implementation of Mental Health First Aid training and the appointment of Mental Health First Aid Officers in workplaces across Australia would help bridge the gap and make a vital difference.

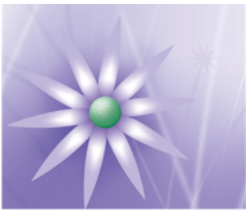
"Mental Health First Aid Officers have the necessary skills to recognise changes in emotions, thinking and behaviour and the confidence to reach out to colleagues they are concerned about. They are also in a position to encourage co-workers to seek appropriate professional help early on, well before the illness becomes severe.

"It is well known that a delay in seeking help for mental health problems can increase the risk of a prolonged absence from work. Also, the longer a person is away from work, the less likely they are to return. Both scenarios are enormously costly to business."

Until recently, Australian workplaces providing staff with access to Mental Health First Aid training and appointing officers has been confined to a very narrow band of industry, primarily healthcare, the public sector and the tertiary education sector.

¹ Andrews G, Hall W, Teesson M, and Henderson S. (1999). The Mental Health of Australians. Mental Health Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

² PwC (2014). Creating a mentally healthy workplace – Return on investment analysis. www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/research-by-ricewaterhouse-coopers.pdf?sfvrsn=0



MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID AUSTRALIA

However, Ms Bovopoulos says the concept is now picking up momentum with major workplaces such as Lendlease (see case study) and law firm, Norton Rose Fulbright, actively championing workplace Mental Health First Aid Officers with the assistance from Mental Health First Aid Australia.

“Having these large organisations embrace the idea is very encouraging and I am confident that as other businesses learn of the benefits and successes of appointing Mental Health First Aid officers, many more will follow suit.”

Ms Bovopoulos is hoping industries most at risk³ of mental illness - such as hospitality and essential services (electricity, water, gas, waste), IT and telecommunications, media, finance and insurance - will take notice of this trend.

“It is these industries that would greatly benefit from training their staff and appointing Mental Health First Aid Officers.”

Founded by mental health consumer and researcher Betty Kitchener AM, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Australia provides evidence-based mental health first aid training for community and workplaces including a newly launched course for white-collar workplaces.

MHFA courses teach participants knowledge and skills in how to offer help to people experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviours, non-suicidal self-injury, panic attacks, a stress reaction after a traumatic event, severe psychotic states, aggressive behaviours and severe effects of substance use. They also learn how to recognise developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, psychosis and substance use problems.

Training is flexible, taking the form of either 12-hours face-to-face, or a blended format (6-hours eLearning plus a 3.5-hour face-to-face session), to provide flexible options for workplaces.

The MHFA Program is an Australian success story, having been rolled out to over 2 per cent of the Australian adult population and licensed out to organisations in more than 22 countries worldwide. It has been endorsed by both US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

Says Ms Bovopoulos: “The courses don’t aim to teach people how to be counsellors or mental health professionals, but rather like traditional first aiders, how to use skills to keep others safe in crisis situations – either until professional help can be found or until the crisis resolves.”

She is now calling on businesses to include Mental Health First Aid Officers as part of their broader action plan for responding to mental health problems in the workplace.

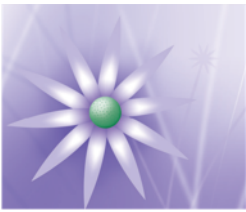
³ Inder, B., Meadows, G., & Cornwell, K. (2013). Labour market costs of mental illness (2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults). *beyondblue*. www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/research/research-projects/research-projects/labour-market-costs-of-mental-illness-in-australia

www.mhfa.com.au

A not-for-profit organisation focused on mental health training and research

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Mental Health First Aid Australia is a trading name of Mental Health First Aid International ABN: 57 153 480 436



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“By 2020 our goal is for 5 per cent of the Australian adult population complete MHFA training and for Mental Health First Aid Officers to be as commonplace as physical first aid officers in the workplace.”

More about Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Australia... A Melbourne based non-profit organisation, MHFA Australia was developed in 2001 by mental health consumer Betty Kitchener AM and her husband, mental health literacy researcher Prof Tony Jorm. Ms Kitchener is CEO of MHFA Australia. Their vision is a community where everyone has the first aid skills to support people with mental health problems.

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