



First Aid for Mental Health

With one in four people experiencing mental health problems every year, most of us know someone who has been affected, but few of us know where to turn for help and treatment. Mental Health First Aid aims to change this.

WHEN SOMEONE IS going through a mental health crisis, having information about where to get effective help and treatment for it can be invaluable. Mental Health First Aid provides just this kind of training.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Mental Health First Aid was developed by the Australian Centre for Mental Health Research. In 2003, the training came to Scotland and is now offered throughout Scotland. In 2009, RehabCare trained 18 managers and staff to become Ireland's first Mental Health First Aid instructors, using the Scottish model of Mental Health First Aid.

Participants explore the impact that mental health difficulties can have on a person's life, challenging both stereotypes and stigma.

Through a five-step action plan, mental health first-aiders are trained to offer comfort and support in a crisis, until the appropriate help and support is accessed, provided by friends, family or professionals. The first-aiders have the confidence of knowing that they are offering effective help. Whenever possible, the person in difficulty is encouraged to be "in the driving seat" and remains in control of the process.

EASE OF ACCESS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Nóirín Mannion, Programme Supervisor in the RehabCare resource centre in Galway and trained Mental

Health First Aid instructor, has worked with more than 40 people through the course. She believes that the Mental Health First Aid programme is successful because it is so easy to access.

"The most important thing about the programme is that it is accessible to everyone, from someone working in a mental health service to a postman or a taxi driver."

The programme is hugely varied. Over 12 hours, people are provided with information about mental health issues including different conditions, how to support someone and where to look for professional help. The programme focuses on mental health recovery and on supporting people to overcome their

mental health difficulties. Participants feel that they are in a safe place and can discuss their perceptions openly. The wellness of course participants is paramount.

For Nóirín Mannion, the programme offers a range of potential benefits to both individuals and the community. "If more people had access to a course like Mental Health First Aid, the level of stigma experienced by people with mental health difficulties would reduce. Stigma is one of the biggest obstacles to wellness for a person with a mental health difficulty. Fear and lack of awareness can stop someone approaching a person in distress.

"People come back to us after they complete the course to tell us that they have actively used the training. One lady said that she had to use her 'first aid' training on the evening that she finished the course to help a young man.

"Everyone has mental health and we all have the potential to be in distress. It really isn't that far from us – our family, friends and colleagues will experience mental health difficulties and Mental Health First Aid helps us to support people who are experiencing these difficulties."

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TRAINEES FEEL THE BENEFITS TOO

Maureen Rabbitte, a tai chi instructor in Galway, was delighted to have the opportunity to take part in the Mental Health First Aid training course.

"The course was very useful from both a personal and a professional point of view. It gives you a real life skill. For me, the course opened up a whole new understanding of mental health issues. The programme demystifies mental health. People who you may have found frightening before are no longer frightening.

"The instructors were fantastic. I think it is great that RehabCare has opened up the programme to people outside the organisation. There are so many people working in the community who could benefit from it. Children should even be doing courses like this in transition year in school."

The programme is delivered through a series of modules and role play is an important tool to aid understanding of how people with mental health difficulties feel and experience their world. For Maureen, one of the most powerful exercises highlighted the impact of schizophrenia on communication. It involves one person talking in one ear while another mumbles in the other ear.

GET INVOLVED

Since April 2010, RehabCare instructors have delivered close to 30 Mental Health First Aid courses, to over 300 Rehab staff and 40 invited guests – including people working in the youth, community and homelessness sectors, Citizens Information Services staff and people working in Supported Employment.

"I found that very powerful and found myself standing up to get away from it in the same way that a person who is agitated might. I found it very revealing."

The programme also teaches participants how to broach the issue of suicide. By the end of the programme they will have asked the question, "Are you thinking about suicide?" through role play and will be comfortable with bringing up the issue. Maureen found this a very valuable part of the programme.

"The programme's coverage of suicide was also very powerful. I now feel comfortable talking about suicide and could ask someone if they are thinking about it. I have even asked people. The question opens things up in a really simple way. It starts the conversation."

Mental Health First Aid can be offered in any community setting. ■



Pictured above: RehabCare's team of Mental Health First Aid Instructors just after the completion of their training programme in March 2010.

WHO TO CONTACT



Mark Logan
Regional Manager
RehabCare (West)
96 Liosban Business Park
Tuam Road, Galway

Tel: 00 353 91 755 686
Email: mark.logan@rehab.ie