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Mental Health First Aid Guide

Recognize Respond Connect

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Mental Health First Aid Guide

Recognize. Respond. Connect.

A community resource for supporting mental health and wellbeing

What Is Mental Health First Aid?

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an **evidence-based training program** that teaches everyday people — not just healthcare professionals — how to recognize signs of mental health and substance use challenges, provide initial support, and guide someone toward appropriate professional help. Just as physical first aid prepares us to respond to injuries, Mental Health First Aid prepares us to respond to emotional and mental health crises.

This guide is designed for **anyone** — a neighbor, coworker, family member, teacher, or community leader — who wants to be better equipped to support those around them.

Why Mental Health First Aid Matters

- **1 in 5 U.S. adults** experiences a mental illness each year (NIMH, 2024)
- Only about **46%** of people with mental illness receive treatment
- **Early intervention** significantly improves recovery outcomes

- **Community support** can be life-saving before professional help is available

Mental Health First Aid does not turn participants into therapists or counselors. Rather, it provides a foundational understanding of mental health and a practical framework for offering compassionate, informed support. The skills learned through MHFA can strengthen communities, workplaces, schools, and families by building a culture where mental health is taken as seriously as physical health.

More than **4 million people** across the United States are certified in Mental Health First Aid. Each of them represents a community touchpoint — someone ready to notice when a friend, student, or colleague may be struggling, and prepared to take a meaningful first step.

**National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or Text 988 | Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 |
Emergency: 911**

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Recognizing Signs of Mental Distress

Knowing what to look for is the first step to helping. Mental distress can appear in many forms and varies from person to person. The signs below may indicate that someone is struggling and could benefit from support.

Emotional & Mood Changes

- Persistent sadness, hopelessness, or tearfulness
- Extreme mood swings or emotional outbursts
- Increased irritability, anger, or agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness, excessive guilt, or shame
- Withdrawal from people and activities once enjoyed
- Numbness or feeling emotionally "flat"

Behavioral Changes

- Neglecting personal hygiene or self-care
- Isolation from friends, family, and social activities
- Changes in sleep patterns (sleeping too much or too little)
- Significant changes in appetite or weight
- Increased use of alcohol or substances
- Declining performance at work or school
- Giving away prized possessions

Cognitive & Thought Changes

- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Racing thoughts or slowed thinking
- Paranoia, hearing voices, or seeing things others don't
- Expressing feelings of being a burden to others
- Talking about death, dying, or not wanting to be alive

Physical Changes

- Unexplained aches, pains, or physical complaints
- Extreme fatigue or low energy
- Psychomotor agitation (e.g., pacing, hand-wringing) or slowing

Warning Signs Requiring Immediate Action — Call 911 or 988

- Talking about wanting to die or end their life
- Looking for means to harm themselves (e.g., stockpiling medications,

accessing weapons)

- Expressing that others would be better off without them
- Making final arrangements, writing goodbye notes
- Severe psychosis or inability to distinguish reality
- Risk of harm to self or others

Remember: You do not need to be an expert to help. Showing you care can make all the difference.

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How to Respond: The ALGEE Action Plan

The **ALGEE Action Plan**, developed by Mental Health First Aid USA, provides a five-step framework anyone can follow to safely and effectively support someone experiencing mental distress. These steps can be used in any order in non-crisis situations.

A — Approach, Assess for Risk

Approach the person privately and compassionately. Assess whether there is risk of suicide or self-harm.

- Choose a quiet, private setting
- Ask directly if you're concerned about suicide: "Are you thinking about ending your life?"
- If risk is present, call 988 or 911 immediately — do not leave the person alone
- Stay calm; your composure helps stabilize theirs

L — Listen Nonjudgmentally

Give the person space to share without interruption, judgment, or unsolicited advice.

- Use open body language and maintain gentle eye contact
- Reflect back what you hear: "It sounds like you've been feeling really overwhelmed."
- Avoid minimizing statements like "Just cheer up" or "Others have it worse"
- Don't feel pressured to fix the problem — being heard is often what's needed most

G — Give Reassurance and Information

Offer hope and factual information about mental health and recovery.

- Remind them that mental health challenges are real, common, and treatable
- Share that effective help is available
- Avoid making promises you can't keep or giving clinical diagnoses
- Validate their experience: "What you're feeling is real and it makes sense."

E — Encourage Appropriate Professional Help

Gently encourage the person to seek professional support.

- Suggest their primary care provider, a therapist, or a psychiatrist as starting points
- Offer to help research options, make a call, or accompany them to an appointment
- Share crisis resources and helplines
- Respect their autonomy — don't force, but keep the door open

E — Encourage Self-Help and Other Support Strategies

Help the person identify additional coping strategies and community supports.

- Encourage connection with trusted friends, family, or a faith community
- Discuss healthy habits: physical activity, sleep, nutrition, limiting alcohol
- Share peer support groups and community mental health programs
- Help them create a simple safety or wellness plan



Helpful Phrases to

Use

- "I've noticed you haven't seemed like yourself lately. I'm here if you want to talk."
- "I care about you and I want to understand what you're going through."
- "You don't have to go through this alone."
- "Would you be open to speaking with someone who can really help?"



Phrases to

Avoid

- "You just need to think positive."
- "You don't look depressed."
- "You have so much to be grateful for."
- "It could be so much worse."

Your role is to support, not diagnose. A compassionate presence can be the bridge to professional care.

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Connecting to Professional Help & Community Resources

Encouraging someone to seek professional help is one of the most important things you can do. Below are key resources available nationally and in most communities.

National Crisis & Helpline Resources

Resource	Contact	Description
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Call or Text: 988	24/7 confidential support for people in distress; prevention and crisis resources for all ages
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741	Free, 24/7 text-based crisis support from trained counselors
SAMHSA National Helpline	1-800-662-4357	Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information service for mental health and substance use
Veterans Crisis Line	Call 988 , Press 1	Confidential support for veterans, service members, and their families
NAMI Helpline	1-800-950-6264	Mental health information, resource referrals, and support from trained volunteers
Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ Youth)	1-866-488-7386	Crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ+ young people
Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline	1-800-422-4453	Crisis intervention and support for child abuse situations, 24/7

Types of Professional Support

- **Primary Care Physicians** — Can screen for mental health conditions and provide referrals
- **Licensed Therapists & Counselors (LCSW, LPC, MFT)** — Talk therapy for a wide range of conditions
- **Psychiatrists** — Medical doctors who can diagnose and prescribe medication
- **Psychologists (PhD/PsyD)** — Specialized in assessment and evidence-based therapy
- **Peer Support Specialists** — People with lived experience who provide mentoring and connection
- **Community Mental Health Centers** — Sliding-scale or free services in most communities
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** — Free, confidential counseling through many employers

Finding Local Resources

- Search SAMHSA's Treatment Locator at **findtreatment.gov** or call 1-800-662-4357
- Contact your local community mental health center or county health department
- Ask your primary care provider for a referral
- Search the NAMI chapter directory at **nami.org/Support-Education**

Taking Care of Yourself — Self-Care for Mental Health First Aiders

Supporting others through mental health challenges can be emotionally taxing. It is essential that you also care for your own wellbeing. **You cannot pour from an empty cup.**

Protect Your Own Mental Health

- Recognize that you are not responsible for another person's choices or recovery
- Set healthy boundaries — it is okay to refer someone to a professional and step back
- Debrief with a trusted person, supervisor, or counselor after a difficult interaction
- Seek your own professional support if you feel overwhelmed
- Practice regular self-care: exercise, rest, nourishing food, hobbies, and social connection
- Know the difference between support and savior — your role is to be a bridge, not a cure

Key Reminders for Every First Aider

- You do not need to have all the answers
- Your presence and compassion matter more than perfect words
- Never promise confidentiality if someone's life may be at risk
- Always follow up — a simple "I've been thinking of you" goes a long way
- Know your limits and refer to professionals when needed

About This Guide

This guide is based on the Mental Health First Aid USA curriculum developed by the **National Council for Mental Wellbeing**, drawing on evidence-based research and national mental health guidelines. For full certification training, visit

mentalhealthfirstaid.org.

For emergencies, always call 911. For mental health crises, call or text 988.

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