

Mental Health First Aid – Key Takeaways

By Arin Jayes

This past December, The Brain Injury Association of Maryland (BIAMD) hosted a Mental Health First Aid Training at The University of Maryland Rehabilitation and Orthopedic Institute. Mental Health First Aid is a national program that teaches the skills to respond to the signs of mental illness and substance use. Our instructors, Anastasia Edmonston, Maryland TBI Partner Project Coordinator at the Maryland Behavioral Health Administration, and Shawn Pringle, Recovery Coach at Total Health Care, Inc.’s Substance Abuse Program, educated attendees about the most common mental illnesses – including depression and mood disorders, anxiety disorders, trauma, psychosis, and substance use disorders.

Just as CPR helps you assist an individual having a heart attack, Mental Health First Aid helps you assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use-related crisis. This accessible, 8-hour course taught us how to identify the risk factors and warning signs for mental health and addiction concerns, strategies for helping someone in both crisis and non-crisis situations, and where to turn for help. Most importantly, we learned about *recovery* and *resiliency* – or the belief that individuals experiencing these challenges can and do get better and use their strengths to stay well.

Here are 8 key takeaways from this training:

1. Mental illness is common and widespread.

While often hidden from public discourse, mental illness is very common in the US. One in five adults have a mental disorder in any one year. In a 2013 US national survey, 18.5 percent of adults (18 or older) experienced a mental illness in any one year – which is roughly 43.8 million people. This reflects the entire adult population of the United States. Subgroups also show higher or lower rates of mental illness.

2. Mental illness is just as debilitating as other chronic illnesses.

Mental disorders are rated among the most disabling illnesses by medical experts. Since mental illness is often an “invisible disability,” people with mental illness are often judged as lazy, weak, or uncooperative, which leads to increased stigma. In the training, we gained an understanding of the degree of disability that mental disorders can cause by comparing it to physical illnesses. For example, the disability cause by moderate depression is similar to the impact from relapsing multiple sclerosis, severe asthma, or chronic hepatitis B. Similarly, the disability from severe depression is comparable to the disability from quadriplegia.

3. People with mental illness are not “violent” or “dangerous.”

Training attendees discuss the misperceptions of individuals living with mental illness – the main one being that they are “violent” or “dangerous”. In actuality, data does not support this perception. Only 5% of violent crimes in the U.S. are committed by people with serious mental illness. The US has had an increase in mass violence over the last few years, which often prompts the media to automatically label suspects as mentally ill. Hate is not a mental illness, and unfortunately, individuals with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators. Thus, there is no need to fear someone living with a mental illness simply because of their diagnosis.

4. The Mental Health First Aid Action Plan can be applied to many different situations.

When you take a course, you learn how to apply the Mental Health First Aid action plan in a variety of situations, including when someone is experiencing panic attacks, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, non-suicidal self-injury, acute psychosis (e.g., hallucinations or delusions), overdose or withdrawal from alcohol or drug use, or a reaction to a traumatic event. Participants gain the opportunity to practice ALGEE, the mnemonic for the 5-step action plan, through role plays, scenarios, and activities, which makes it easier to apply these skills in a real-life situation.

5. The Mental Health First Aid Action Plan is accessible and can be utilized by anyone.

Mental health issues affect all of society in some way, shape, or form. Because it is so common, it is extremely likely that you will encounter someone in your family, workplace, school, church, or community who lives with a diagnosed mental illness. You do not have to be a certified medical or mental health professional to utilize Mental Health First Aid. The training is written in an accessible manner to enable people without formal medical training support people in crisis, and as a result, reduce harm and prevent loss of life.

6. There are still ways to support a person even if they are not ready to change.

You can support someone living with mental illness without being responsible for changing their behavior. For example, when supporting someone living with a substance use disorder, you can refer the individual to resources and educate them about organizations in your community. You can tell the person what you are willing and able to do to help, which can range from simply being a good listener to organizing professional help. While you can help them realize that they can take responsibility for their use, it is ultimately up to the person. Therefore, when utilizing mental health first aid, your primary goal is to reduce harm, not change the person.

7. It is important to remember that we know very little about what a person is up against.

When supporting someone living with mental illness, is important to not jump to conclusions about a person’s diagnosis or lived reality. For example, mental disorders often occur in

combination. It is common for a person with an anxiety disorder to also develop depression, or a person who is depressed to also have a substance use disorder. Dual diagnosis, comorbidity, or co-occurrence are terms used to describe having more than one mental disorder. Additionally, mental disorders often share symptoms. For example, hallucinations can be a symptom of schizophrenia but can also be experienced when a person is in severe withdrawal from an opioid dependency. In this way, it is important to be kind, patient, and not make assumptions about what a person is going through.

8. To support someone living with mental illness, you must also take care of yourself.

While this training provided us with important information about supporting individuals with mental illness, it also acknowledged the toll that this support can take on the individuals providing it. There is the saying “you cannot pour from an empty cup.” This means that when we do not take care of ourselves, we cannot take care of other people. If you are supporting someone living with mental illness, you can practice self-care by seeking your own individual counseling or psychotherapy.



[**CLICK HERE**](#) to sign up for a Mental Health First Aid Training near you.

And [**CLICK HERE**](#) to find out why this cute Koala Bear's Name is ALGEE.

The National Suicide Lifeline is also available 24 hours a day, every day: 1-800-273-8255.

REFERENCES

Mental Health First Aid USA (1st ed.). (2015). Washington, DC: National Council for Behavioral Health. Print.