



# A Community Approach to Mental Health Education

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

When we think of first aid, we tend to think of cuts, scrapes, bandages, and broken bones. We tend to think of medical problems and of course each of us has some knowledge about how to take care of these.

But what if we expand the idea of “first aid” to include mental health? What if each of us learned techniques that could help another person who was experiencing mental health distress?

There is a program available in Cecil County that can give us that information. It’s called Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). This is an educational program that started in Australia in 2001 and has gained in popularity and recognition in the U.S. since 2008.

## **What is “Mental Health First Aid?”**

This is an eight hour course that teaches you how to help someone who may be developing a mental health problem or who is experiencing a mental health crisis. The training helps you identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness and also substance use disorders.

The curriculum for the MHFA course prepares participants to be “educated responders.” It gives participants the ability to assist people who have issues concerning mental health. This compares to what the Red Cross First Aid courses offer for issues concerning physical health.

By taking the MHFA course, participants learn:

- The risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems.
- Facts and information on symptoms of depression, anxiety, trauma, psychosis, and addiction disorders.
- A 5-step action plan to help someone who may be developing a mental health problem or who is presently in crisis.
- Where to turn for help, including a detailed list of professional, peer, and self-help resources.

In addition, as participants gain more knowledge about mental illness, they learn that it is part of the spectrum of human nature. In this sense, the course helps to de-stigmatize mental illness. Just as some individuals develop cancer, some also become experience the symptoms of a mental illness. It is just another disease with its own set of symptoms and its own list of recommended treatments that help to manage or reverse the symptoms.

There are two Course Types for MHFA. They are:

- The Adult Mental Health First Aid course, which is appropriate for anyone age 16 and older who wants to learn how to help a person who may be experiencing a mental health related crisis or problem. The adult course is available in both English and Spanish. Within this category are a few course modules for specialized sub-groups. These modules include 1) Older Adult, 2) Veterans, 3) Higher Education (focusing on individuals in the college population), and 4) Public Safety.
- The Youth Mental Health First Aid course, which is primarily intended for adults who want to learn how to help young people experiencing mental health challenges or crises. It reviews the unique risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems in adolescents ages 12-18 and emphasizes the importance of early intervention.

Each MHFA course is offered as an 8-hour program. Sometimes the class is presented in one day, with two four-hour segments and a lunch break in between, and sometimes the class is presented on two different days of four hours each.

When MHFA first came to the U.S., Maryland and Missouri were the first two states to adopt it. We now have many certified instructors. Here in Cecil County, we have several certified MHFA instructors and classes are already being offered.

In fact, the county now receives some grant funding to provide these classes. The Cecil County government has recognized the importance of the Mental Health First Aid course and awarded some of the Video Lottery Terminal funds that come from Hollywood Casino to make six classes available in this county. These classes are taught and facilitated by certified MHFA instructor Sheila Murphy, Community Relations Manager at Upper Bay Counseling & Support Services.

Notably, Chief Richard Brooks, Director of Cecil County Emergency Services, not only attended one of the MHFA trainings himself but had all the Cecil County Emergency Services managers, including the 911 dispatchers and Paramedics, attend this training as well. It is gratifying to know that Chief Brooks would occupy the Emergency Operations Center with a room full of responders excited to learn about mental health.

It's good to know that our emergency responders in Cecil County have a working knowledge of mental health issues and that they know how to assist people who are struggling with mental health problems.

I highly recommend the Mental Health First Aid classes in Cecil County to anyone who wants to learn more about mental health and, more specifically, know how to respond to someone who may be experiencing mental health problems.

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