



**MENTAL HEALTH  
AND WELLBEING**



**The Open  
University**

# **MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDERS**

**A framework**

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# 1. CONTEXT

Mental health and wellbeing impacts on all aspects of our lives in terms of how we feel, function, and interact with others – one in four adults will experience mental ill-health at some point in their life. This is something The Open University recognises and takes extremely seriously. That's why we have developed the [Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#), in line with the [Universities UK #stepchange framework for mental health in higher education](#). Our strategy will ensure that everyone across the University recognises that mental health is not solely related to a disability or illness. Instead, it represents a continuum in which we all live and will experience throughout our lives,

One of the actions resulting from the strategy is to implement a Mental Health First Aider Scheme, to train staff across the University in the principles of mental health first aid. We recognise that expanding this scheme across the University is an important element for creating a safe and healthy workplace, where mental health and physical health are valued equally. It is hoped that increasing the number and distribution of Mental Health First Aiders across the University, will help to increase awareness of mental health issues and reduce the stigma and discrimination that is sometimes associated with this topic.

This document outlines the approach to setting up and maintaining a Mental Health First Aider Scheme across all units within the University.

## 2. ROLE OF THE MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDER

### 2.1 Definitions used within this document

**Mental health first aid** is the help offered to a person who is: exhibiting signs of developing a mental health issue; experiencing a worsening of an existing mental health issue; or who is in mental health crisis and requires some level of intervention. Mental health first aid is provided to a person until the immediate crisis or need is resolved and/or professional help is received.

A **Mental Health First Aider** is a member of staff who has attended and passed a Mental Health First Aid training course, delivered by an accredited Mental Health First Aid Instructor.

## 2.2 Role description

The role of a Mental Health First Aider (MHFA) in the workplace is two-fold:

1. To spot the early signs and symptoms of poor mental health displayed by colleagues in the workplace.
2. To act as a point of contact for managers and colleagues in their own units, who may require advice regarding where to signpost individuals for support with mental health concerns or issues.

MHFAs are not trained to be counsellors, therapists, or psychiatrists, and are not medical professionals. They can, however, offer initial support to individuals by providing timely information, and listening and communicating non-judgementally. MHFAs will show empathy and compassion for an individual in need of mental health support, but without becoming emotionally involved in the conversation.

They are trained to:

- Spot the early signs and symptoms of mental ill health.
- Start a supportive conversation with a colleague or student who may be experiencing a mental health issue or emotional distress.
- Listen to and communicate with the person without judgement.
- Use the five-step action plan to provide mental health first aid to a person experiencing a mental health issue or crisis (plan provided as part of the training).
- Assess the immediate risk of suicide or self-harm.
- Encourage the person to access appropriate professional support or self-help strategies. This might include encouraging access to internal support systems such as the Employee Assistance Programme, or SHOUT, a text messaging support service. (Details of these services can be found on the [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) section of My Learning Centre.)
- Escalate to the appropriate emergency services, if necessary.
- Maintain confidentiality, as outlined in section 4.5 of this document.

- Complete an anonymous log of the key elements of the conversation: date, duration, unit, theme, and signposting recommendations given (link to Microsoft Form provided on the MHFA Microsoft Teams site and managed by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Team).
- Liaise with Estates (Security) to complete relevant critical incident documents, as and when necessary.
- Monitor and manage their own mental health and wellbeing while performing their role.
- Where it is believed that children or vulnerable adults may be at risk, the MHFA will complete a specific MHFA Safeguarding Referral Form and email it to [Safeguarding-referrals@open.ac.uk](mailto:Safeguarding-referrals@open.ac.uk) (see section 4.6 for more details).

## 2.3 Role boundaries

It is important for MHFAs to recognise the boundaries of their role. MHFAs act as an initial point of contact, listening without judgement to a person who may be experiencing a mental health issue or emotional distress, and signposting them to professional support.

MHFAs are **not** counsellors and their role is **not** to provide ongoing support or diagnosis, but to provide a timely intervention to prevent harm to life, help prevent a mental health issue becoming more serious and to promote good mental health.

Where a MHFA believes that another member of staff requires professional support or advice, they should encourage them to contact the University's Employee Assistance Programme provided by Health Assured on the following freephone number: 0800 0280199 (Republic of Ireland: 1800 936071). All calls to the helpline will be answered by a qualified counsellor. Other external organisations offering support can be located on the [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) section of My Learning Centre.

Where a MHFA has a serious concern that a member of staff may be in immediate danger of self-harm, they should dial 999, ask for the Police, and explain that a colleague is at serious risk of self-harm or suicide. If the person is working from home, MHFAs need to contact the People Hub in People Services to find out the address and telephone number of the person, so that they can call the emergency services. If the person is working on site, the MHFA should call the emergency services and then alert Security.

As a follow-up to the crisis situation, the MHFA should call the Senior People Adviser (SPA) for the staff member's unit and explain that a colleague has experienced a crisis. The SPA

will contact the staff member outlining the support available to them. The list of current SPAs for each unit is available on the MHFA Teams site.

Where a MHFA believes that a student requires professional support or advice, they should encourage them to seek support from the doctor, or if appropriate, to contact their Student Support Team (if an undergraduate or postgraduate taught student), or the Graduate School (if a postgraduate research student), or to engage with the support provided from Togetherall or SHOUT. More information about student facing support can be found on the [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) section of the Help Centre (for undergraduate or postgraduate taught students) and the [Student Wellbeing](#) section of the Graduate School Network. Postgraduate research students can also be directed to the University's Employee Assistance Programme provided by Health Assured.

More information about these processes and GDPR implications will be provided at the induction session for MHFAs.

## **2.4 Role commitments**

The time commitment for MHFAs is likely to be around 4 to 5 days each year, which includes time for networking and professional development events (approximately one day).

As the MHFA training certification has a 3-year duration, MHFAs would need to commit to an additional half day refresher training course every 3 years. This will form part of their 4 to 5 days commitment that year.

A list of trained MHFAs will be kept centrally by the EDI Team. Any MHFA who no longer wishes to remain on this list (e.g. due to other work or personal commitments), should contact [edi-team@open.ac.uk](mailto:edi-team@open.ac.uk) and ask to be removed (either temporarily or permanently) from it.

## **3. DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDERS**

Completion of a 2-day Mental Health First Aid certificated training course is required to become a Mental Health First Aider. MHFAs will also be expected to attend a half day refresher training course every three years.

Units can refer staff to attend MHFA training at any time and courses will be offered based on demand and available space. The cost of this training will be covered centrally by Student Support Services (Academic Services).

To check availability and register for the course, staff need to visit the course page on My Learning Centre: [Mental Health First Aid 2 Day Training Course](#). If units are interested in scheduling a course for a group of staff within their units, they should send their enquiries to [sas-mh-advice@open.ac.uk](mailto:sas-mh-advice@open.ac.uk).

Staff who are already qualified as a MHFA and completed training outside the OU need to provide a dated certificate as proof of eligibility. If the course was completed more than three years ago, evidence of appropriate refresher training would be needed prior to joining the OU MHFA Scheme. Where MHFA certification has lapsed, the staff member will need to complete the full 2-day training course. If staff who have a current MHFA qualification wish to feel more confident in their skills, they can attend a refresher course at any time.

All MHFAs who join the OU scheme will be required to engage in a one hour briefing session. This session will remind MHFAs of what is expected in their role, how the scheme will operate at the OU, and the development and support that is available to them. It will also provide information about the safeguarding process at the OU and what MHFAs need to do if a safeguarding issue becomes apparent whilst talking to an individual.

A Microsoft Teams site and support network for all OU MHFAs has been set up, and members will be encouraged to attend scheduled online groups meetings on a quarterly basis to share experiences and good practice. Reference documents and development materials will be stored on the Teams site for ease of access by all members.

Trained MHFAs who provide mental health first aid to colleagues or students will be able to have a debriefing session with a counsellor from Health Assured (as part of the Employee Assistance Programme), if required (e.g. if dealing with a traumatic or challenging situation). The recommendation is that debriefing sessions take place within 24-48 hours of the mental health first aid support being provided. Sometimes, MHFAs may feel that they need a conversation at a later stage as the impact of the session may have a delayed effect. To arrange a conversation, MHFAs should call Health Assured on their freephone number: 0800 0280199 (Republic of Ireland: 1800 936071)

## 4. OPERATION OF THE SCHEME

### 4.1 Numbers of Mental Health First Aiders per unit

The purpose of establishing this MHFA framework is to encourage all units to have their own trained MHFAs. Whilst there is not a recommended number of MHFAs per number of employees, Mental Health First Aid England suggests organisations should consider having as many Mental Health First Aiders as physical First Aiders.

Within the OU, the MHFA framework will operate with approximately one MHFA for every 125 to 150 staff, which replicates the University's number of physical First Aiders. As mental health first aid and physical first aid are very different, units may need to consider other factors that could have a bearing on the number of MHFAs needed in their unit. It is expected that MHFAs will be available to support staff and postgraduate students remotely as well as within an office location. Depending on the considerations below, units may wish to slightly increase their number of MHFAs.

- Extent of sickness absence due to stress and mental health issues in the unit.
- Extent of organisational change within a unit.
- Nature of the role - especially if the job involves numerous demands, is fast-paced, or places significant emotional demands on people; for example:
  - Helplines for students (Computing Helpdesk, Student Recruitment, Student Support Teams etc.)
  - Helplines for staff (IT Helpdesk, People Hub)
  - Student complaints
  - Student or staff case work
  - Face-to-face support for students (e.g. supporting Postgraduate Research Students)
  - Safeguarding

Once the scheme has been operating for 6 months, analysis will be undertaken by the EDI Team to determine whether additional MHFAs are needed in any specific areas of the University in order to meet demand and avoid over-burdening existing MHFAs.



## 4.2 Initial set-up of the scheme

The OU already has a significant number of staff who have been trained as MHFAs. As this training was generally delivered from the perspective of supporting students, trained MHFA staff will be contacted by the EDI Team and asked if they wish to join the scheme to provide MHFA support to colleagues.

To find out who had at the OU already completed MHFA training, a questionnaire was sent to line managers in 2021 for onward dissemination to their direct reports. The returned questionnaires have been analysed and the number of additional MHFAs required in specific units identified. Units will be notified about any gaps in their provision, so they can seek expressions of interest from staff who would like to be trained as MHFAs, to join the scheme.

Trained MHFAs who would like to join the OU scheme in 2022 will be asked to complete a questionnaire to ensure that the EDI Team has the most up-to-date information.

When seeking expressions of interest to become a MHFA, units are expected to:

- Consider the size and demographics of their unit to determine the number of MHFAs required.
- Consider the type of activities undertaken (see Section 4.1).
- Ensure a diverse range of staff are trained as MHFAs, encompassing different roles, grades, and protected characteristics (i.e. age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex (also consider full range of genders), and sexual orientation).

Given that a large proportion of the staffing at the University comprises Associate Lecturers (ALs), it is envisaged that mental health first aid support will, in the first instance, be provided by their line managers (Staff Tutors/Student Experience Managers) as the staffing group most likely to be in contact with an AL. Any AL who wishes to be trained as a MHFA and join the OU scheme would need to speak with their Lead Line Manager in the first instance. This is to ensure the AL has sufficient capacity to take on this role, and is able to work on a regular basis with other staff in their unit.

There is no application process for becoming a MHFA, however managers will need to consent to the time commitment expected of the role.

Staff can register directly on any of the open MHFA training courses listed on My Learning Centre. Units can also request a group training session (subject to trainer availability) by contacting [sas-mh-advice@open.ac.uk](mailto:sas-mh-advice@open.ac.uk).

If there are no general spaces or group sessions available, units can forward names of staff interested in becoming a Mental Health First Aider to [sas-mh-advice@open.ac.uk](mailto:sas-mh-advice@open.ac.uk) or complete the expression of interest form on My Learning Centre. Training sessions are scheduled on a regular basis.

### 4.3 Administration of the scheme

A centrally managed list of all MHFAs who have volunteered to join the MHFA scheme will be kept by the EDI Team. This list will include the following information:

- Name, email, and work telephone number
- Date of joining the OU's MHFA scheme
- Date when the two-day Mental Health First Aid training was completed
- Date when refresher training was completed
- Date when refresher training is due

Colleagues seeking support from a MHFA (either for themselves or others) should check their local unit listing in the first instance. If they prefer to seek information and advice from someone outside of their unit, they should email [edi-team@open.ac.uk](mailto:edi-team@open.ac.uk).

Anyone who is at risk of harming themselves or attempting to take their own life or seeking help for someone in crisis should contact 999 immediately, ask for the police and let the emergency services know what the situation is.

Units will be expected to keep their own local records of staff who have completed MHFA training and have joined the OU MHFA scheme, and to promote this support service to their staff (e.g. by adding information about mental health first aid and who the local MHFAs are, on their Intranet sites).

MHFAs leaving the OU need to advise the EDI Team of the date they will be leaving by sending an email to [edi-team@open.ac.uk](mailto:edi-team@open.ac.uk).

## 4.4 Operating hours

The MHFA Scheme will be available to all staff across the whole OU between 09:00 and 17:00. We recognise that many staff work outside these hours, so may be unable to contact a MHFA during the day. In these circumstances, staff are advised to seek help from one of the following:

- The Employee Assistance Programme helpline on 0800 0280199 (Republic of Ireland: 1800 936071).
- Shout 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks in the UK - text OU on 85258.
- The Samaritans on 116 123.
- 999, if they feel they are at risk of harming themselves or attempting to take their own life

Mental health first aid support will be available to staff irrespective of where they are working, with MHFAs supporting individuals online/by phone, or where relevant, face to face if working on site.

## 4.5 Confidentiality

All MHFAs are expected to treat matters sensitively and confidentially. Confidentiality should only be broken if a situation arises where MHFAs believe that there is a serious risk of harm to the person or others.

The University has a duty of care to act if a student or staff member expresses suicidal thoughts or reveals planned suicidal action. Individuals may well ask for confidentiality under these circumstances. However, health and safety considerations override any commitment to confidentiality given to students and staff. Such commitments should be broken if there is a serious risk that someone might harm themselves or others.

In such a scenario, the MFHA is obliged to break confidentiality to fulfil a duty of care to keep colleagues safe at work.

If the individual who is at potential risk is at one of the OU office locations, the MHFA will call 999 immediately, ask for the police and let the emergency services know what the situation is, including the individual's name and exact location on site.

The MHFA will also need to contact Security on (01908) 653666 (extension 53666 if on site) to advise them that the emergency services have been called and where they need to go. A 24-hour presence is maintained within the Security Lodge (based in Milton Keynes) 365 days a year.

If the individual who is at potential risk is working from home or is in a different location, the MHFA will call 999 immediately, ask for the police and let the emergency services know what the situation is. They will also pass on any contact details they have for the individual at risk (e.g. name, phone number and address).

## 4.6 Safeguarding

Where a MHFA believe that children or vulnerable adults may be at risk but not in immediate danger, they will be asked to complete a specific MHFA Safeguarding Referral Form and email it to [Safeguarding-Referrals@open.ac.uk](mailto:Safeguarding-Referrals@open.ac.uk).

If the MHFA is concerned that children or vulnerable adults are in immediate danger, they will call 999, ask for the police and let the emergency services know what the situation is. They will also pass on any contact details they have relevant to the individuals at risk (e.g. name, phone number and address).

MHFAs will be expected to follow the 'Four Rs' approach to safeguarding and supporting staff when they need to make a referral to the Safeguarding Team:

- Recognise – Listening for trigger words or phrases, which might suggest there is a risk. For example, these might include physical abuse, neglect, and domestic abuse.
- Respond – By allowing the staff member space to talk but letting them know there is a concern, which cannot be kept confidential. Let the staff member know the details they have shared will be passed to the Safeguarding Team and handled in accordance with the [Safeguarding Policy Privacy Notice \(Appendix B\)](#).
- Record – The information shared by the staff member during the conversation, including date and time of disclosure and any timelines shared, which might help to give context. MHFAs *might* need to ask for clarification regarding some points made during the conversation.

- For example, if it is disclosed that children are involved, it would be helpful to know their ages, although this is not a necessity. MHFAs should not investigate the concern shared.
- Report – By completing the specific MHFA Referral Form and submitting it via email to the Safeguarding Team.

(More information about [Safeguarding](#) can be found on the OU Intranet A-Z)

If a MHFA wishes to discuss a case before making a referral, they can email the Safeguarding Referrals Team ([Safeguarding-referrals@open.ac.uk](mailto:Safeguarding-referrals@open.ac.uk)) stating that they are a Mental Health First Aider and wish to discuss a concern linked to a staff member. This mailbox is managed from 09:00 to 17:00, Monday to Friday. It is monitored intermittently over longer closure periods such as Christmas and Easter. A senior member of the Safeguarding Team will call them back to offer confidential support and guidance.

#### **4.7 Logging support conversations**

MHFAs will be expected to complete an anonymous log of the key elements of any mental health first aid conversation held with staff. This will be completed via a Microsoft Form (link provided within the MHFA Teams site) and only accessible by specified staff in the EDI Team. As the information gathered will be anonymised, it will not be added to Success Factors, nor will it be used to refer the staff member who was supported by the MHFA to additional support. The information logged will comprise:

- Date of conversation
- Unit
- Length of conversation
- Theme of conversation (e.g. work related, personal life, or a combination)
- Signposting recommendations given

The anonymised information will be used to generate reports on a quarterly basis at University level to:

1. Gain insight into the numbers and locations of staff experiencing mental health issues, and whether these are work-related, due to personal issues, or a combination of the two.

2. Identify whether the number of MHFAs is appropriate for the demand for support.
3. Check that appropriate signposting is being given to colleagues who need support for themselves or for others.

## **4.8 Opting out of the scheme**

There may be times when staff who have volunteered to be part of the MHFA Scheme feel that they are no longer able to continue with this role, perhaps due to work or personal reasons.

Staff can opt out of the scheme at any time, either on a temporary or permanent basis. If staff wish to opt out of the scheme, they need to advise their unit and the EDI Team by emailing [edi-team@open.ac.uk](mailto:edi-team@open.ac.uk), stating the date on which they wish to opt out and whether this is on a temporary or permanent basis.

## **4.9 Promoting the service**

The MHFA Scheme will be promoted to staff on a regular basis via the usual channels, such as Inside Track bulletins, OU Life news items and Snowball news articles.

Individual units will be expected to post a list of their MHFAs on their Intranet pages (showing the MHFA's name, email address and work phone number) and ensure all staff are aware of the support available.