

Mental Health First Aid: Military Members, Veterans and their Families

While military service often fosters resilience in individuals and families, some may experience mental health or substance use challenges. It is essential that our communities be prepared to identify and support the more than 22 million veterans and their families who have served our country. Mental Health First Aid is a way to increase the level of baseline knowledge about mental health and substance use concerns and, if necessary, to help individuals get connected to care.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

Mental Health First Aid USA is a live training program — like regular First Aid or CPR — designed to give ordinary people the skills to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. Mental Health First Aid uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to recognize and respond to the warning signs of specific illnesses.

Mental Health First Aid teaches participants a five-step action plan, ALGEE, to support someone developing signs and symptoms of a mental illness or in an emotional crisis:

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm
- Listen nonjudgmentally
- Give reassurance and information
- Encourage appropriate professional help
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies

In 2008, the National Council for Behavioral Health brought Mental Health First Aid to the U.S. More than 150,000 people have been trained in Mental Health First Aid through a network of more than 3,700 certified instructors.

Those trained include family members of persons with mental health challenges, healthcare professionals, first responders, law enforcement officials, public service employees, school and college staff, clergy and caring citizens.

WHY MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

Mental Health First Aid helps people know that mental illness is real, common, and treatable and that it's OK to seek help. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of this program to improve knowledge of mental disorders and substance use, remove fear and misunderstanding, and enable those trained to offer concrete assistance.

The program is listed in SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidenced Based Programs and Practices. Mental Health First Aid is a low-cost, high-impact program that generates tremendous community awareness and support.

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID FOR VETERANS

Family members and personnel working with military and families are often not aware of how to engage veterans with mental illnesses and addictions. In addition to the impact of military service on the veteran, each has a circle of family (significant other, children, parents, siblings, etc.) and friends who are also impacted by their military service.

Mental Health First Aid offers a simple, proven combination of information and techniques for effective interventions. A tailored module builds upon the effectiveness of the standard Mental Health First Aid curriculum by focusing on the unique experiences and needs of the military, veteran and family population.



Mental Health First Aiders can help to:

- Break down the stigma associated with mental illness like anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and substance use disorders
- Reach out to those who suffer in silence, reluctant to seek help
- Let veterans know that support is available in their community
- Provide community resource information
- Make mental healthcare and treatment accessible to thousands in need

Key components of the module for military members, veterans and their families include:



- A discussion of military culture and its relevance to the topic of mental health
- A discussion of the specific risk factors faced by many service members and their families such as trauma, both mental and physical, stress, separation, etc.
- Applying the ALGEE action plan in a number of scenarios designed specifically for service members, their families and those that support them
- A review of common mental health resources for service members, their families and those who support them

Joining Forces has expressed interest in supporting the growth of Mental Health First Aid for Military Members, Veterans and their Families. After an initial meeting in January, Joining Forces staff members have reviewed the program content and are coordinating a meeting with Mental Health First Aid, Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration. A possible national rollout of the program could occur in April 2014.

Nearly 100 Mental Health First Aid courses have been provided to organizations that serve the military, veterans and their families including:

- Army One Source, *National webinar*
- Veterans Affairs and Veteran's Restoration Quarters in Buncombe County and the Asheville Buncombe Community Mission, *North Carolina*
- Delaware County Veteran Affairs, *Iowa*
- Ft. Leonard Wood, *Missouri*
- Army National Guard and Air National Guard, *Orange County, California*
- The University of Texas Pan American (UTPA), *Texas*
- Wounded Warriors, *Texas*
- California Army Guard & Reserve and US Air Force personnel at Beale Air Force Base, *California*
- Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, *Minnesota*
- Family Life Chaplains Training Center at Fort Hood, *Texas*
- Spokane VA Medical Center, *Washington*
- Salt Lake City VA, *Utah*
- Veterans Administration, *Albuquerque, New Mexico*
- Charlotte Hall Veterans Home, *Maryland*
- Hutchinson & Kansas City National Guard Armory, *Kansas*
- California State University Veterans Group, *Pomona, California*
- Veteran's Affairs Hospital, *Phoenix, AZ*
- The National Veterans Center, *Washington, DC*

TESTIMONIALS

"I realized [that] **the military has so much more to learn** and we are behind [when it comes to] mental health."

"The information is **fantastically succinct**; I really like the military addition."

"[Military-Veteran Mental Health First Aid] is definitely a class that I would recommend to anyone in a situation to respond to military members crisis. **I feel better equipped** to assist in mental health incidents since attending."

