

PURPOSE

The purpose of this business guide is to provide members with information on mental health first aid programmes. It should be noted that there are differing perspectives on how to support and promote mental health conversations in the workplace. Having a mental health first aid program is just one option. Members might also find useful the [National Communications Charter](#) which also guides the way people talk about mental ill-health and suicide. This guide is for internal use by member businesses of Consult Australia.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Mental health first aid can be defined as *'help provided to a person who is developing a mental health problem, experiencing a worsening of an existing mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional help is received, or the crisis resolves.'*¹

Mental health first aid is a concept that was established by in 1997 with the first mental health first aid course inspired by the teaching of physical first aid and the creator's own personal mental health challenges. The course has gained international attention and support.

Establishment of a mental health first aid program can demonstrate that a business prioritises and supports the health and well-being of its staff. After completing mental health first aid program training, our members report having a better understanding of how to engage a colleague in conversation to understand how they are, as well as how to recommend additional support if it is needed. Our members also report improved confidence to approach conversations, feeling equipped to know what to say.

A 2017 study found that mental health first aid training can improve mental health first aid knowledge, mental disorders knowledge, and perspectives on effective treatments. It can also reduce stigma surrounding mental illness and improve the confidence of participants in assisting people experiencing mental illness as well as increase willingness or intentions to assist.

HOW TO INTRODUCE MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TO YOUR BUSINESS

Mental Health First Aid Australia has developed a series of [guidelines](#) on providing mental health first aid support in different circumstances, developed in collaboration with researchers from the University of Melbourne, Deakin University, and the University of Tasmania. The guideline on ['Providing mental health first aid in the workplace'](#) focuses on:

- noticing changes in someone's behaviour and knowing how and when to approach them (including recognising whether you have the appropriate training to do so)
- how to speak with and support someone experiencing a mental health challenge
- making reasonable adjustments or supporting a staff member with a mental health challenge.

There are a variety of organisations providing mental health first aid training programs including [Mental Health First Aid Australia](#), [Australian Red Cross](#), and [St John Ambulance](#)

For further detail designing support frameworks, including how to appoint mental health first aid officers, read [Mental Health First Aid Australia's Implementation Guide](#).

Consult Australia members with mental health first aid programs used the following focus areas to frame their program:

¹ According to Mental Health First Aid Australia, a not-for-profit specialising in the area, for example, see: [What We Do at Mental Health First Aid](#).

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Leadership

Creating any cultural shift requires leadership promotion and participation. Awareness training for leaders and staff ensure they are supported in supporting their teams and co-workers.



Communication

To navigate staff hesitancy and to increase understanding, it is recommended that any mental health first aid program be supported by clear communication about the purpose of the program.



Participation

Welcoming staff into the design and delivery of a mental health first aid program empowers them to take ownership over its promotion and usage. It is important to allow staff the choice in participating, and not make anyone feel pressured to get involved.



Coordination

Frameworks should be designed to support staff to use the learnings from the training. This includes developing internal procedures to support staff through their wellbeing and mental health challenges, and structures to provide support to mental health first aid officers. Mental health first aid officers provide mental health first aid support in their workplace when necessary. After undergoing a training program, a mental health first aid officer will have the skills and understanding on how to listen, provide empathy and support, as well as how to escalate to appropriate professional help when required. mental health first aid officers should always practice confidentiality, unless there is a risk of harm to another individual, in which case they should escalate to the appropriate professional help.

Despite remote working as a result of COVID-19, our members report that the mental health first aid training they received online was still engaging and able to increase confidence and understanding in their staff.

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID IN PRACTICE

Several Consult Australia members have introduced mental health first aid programs including Arcadis, Aurecon, Pritchard Francis and SMEC. Below are case studies provided by Pritchard Francis, a medium member business and SMEC, a large firm of their experiences.



At Pritchard Francis, the health and wellbeing of their people remains of paramount importance. The business understands its true value lies within its people, and maintaining a healthy workplace is essential to ensuring its people feel accepted, respected, and supported. Pritchard Francis recognises that establishing a mental health first aid programme contributes significantly to reducing the stigma around mental health struggles and creates a cultural shift in awareness and understanding of wellbeing.

Pritchard Francis are proud to have become a Mental Health First Aid Skilled Workplace, with 12 people undertaking training to become dedicated mental health first aid officers. Pritchard Francis found the course well structured, informative, and engaging. Mental Health First Aid Australia named the business a 'Gold Skills Workplace' recognizing the commitment to mental health first aid training and embedding mental health wellbeing into the culture.

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Ongoing commitment to mental health is reflected in key performance indicators which requires at least 10% of people be trained in mental health first aid. This includes individuals from a diverse range of roles, office locations, and leadership positions.

The World Health Organisation identifies mental health as *'[a] state of well-being in which every individual realises her or his own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.'* With this in mind, Pritchard Francis continually strives to ensure the environment and the support provided to each other aspires to achieve this.

Benefits noted by Pritchard Francis of having a mental health first aid programme

At a recent round table discussion, the first aid group at Pritchard Francis overwhelmingly agreed on the benefits of the training:

- ✓ The mental health literacy obtained during the training enabled first aiders to recognise signs and symptoms, provide empathy and determine when and how to support team members in need. This skillset proved useful within personal relationships outside of the workplace, highlighting the societal flow on effect of the programme.



Member of the Surbana Jurong Group

As part of SMEC's Mental Health Strategy across Australia and NZ in 2018, the leadership group recommended a mental health programme amongst a suite of measures. A coordinated set of activities covering awareness, prevention and support relating to mental health issues was launched. The Mental Health Strategy was led by State Managers and the Health, Safety and Environment team. This was initially targeted to Managers but over time this expanded to other employees such as Office Managers, Team Administrators, members of the People and Culture team, Engineers and general staff who have an interest in becoming a mental health first aider.

Each SMEC office has trained first aiders with a list of these people including photos are easily accessible via SMEC's intranet with further information, guidelines and resources around health and wellbeing in the internal Health and Wellbeing Portal. Mental health first aid is also promoted at All Staff updates and in other communications distributed to all staff. In total, SMEC currently has 49 first aiders around Australia and NZ.

Benefits noted by SMEC of having a mental health first aid programme

- ✓ The training is evidence-based and delivered by an accredited training provider where individuals learn the knowledge and skills to provide initial informal support to employees.
- ✓ The programme enables SMEC to create greater awareness and promote positive mental health within the workplace. It also enables employees to identify and refer people to the relevant support, create a safe space to discuss mental health matters, respond to and provide guidance in urgent or critical situations.
- ✓ SMEC has created a Mental Health First Aider Network who meet quarterly basis to confidentially discuss any initiatives and issues identified in their regions. This network is utilised to support and provide feedback to each other. It also acts to reinforce MHFA roles, boundaries and responsibilities. The network appreciates the support and goodwill from the business as it continues to grow, given it is intangible to identify its effectiveness quantitatively.

This guide provides a summary only of the subject matter covered, without the assumption of duty of care by Consult Australia. The summary should not be relied on as a substitute for legal or other professional advice.