

## Why mental health first aid should be on your radar



(Source: Unsplash, Sydney Sims)

Do you know someone who has a mental health illness? What do you think your level of knowledge and skill is to recognise and support someone struggling with a mental health problem? These were some of the questions posed to members of the Prime Team at a session I recently ran on mental health first aid in the workplace.

### What are the stats?

Over the last 12 to 18 months, there has been a 20-30% increase in the number of people accessing mental health support services in Australia.<sup>1</sup> You're probably not surprised by this, given the impact of COVID-19 on most of our lives. However, given that ~45% of people aged 16-85 years old will suffer from a mental health illness at some time in their lifetime anyway, a 20 to 30% increase is significant.<sup>2</sup>

### What is mental health?

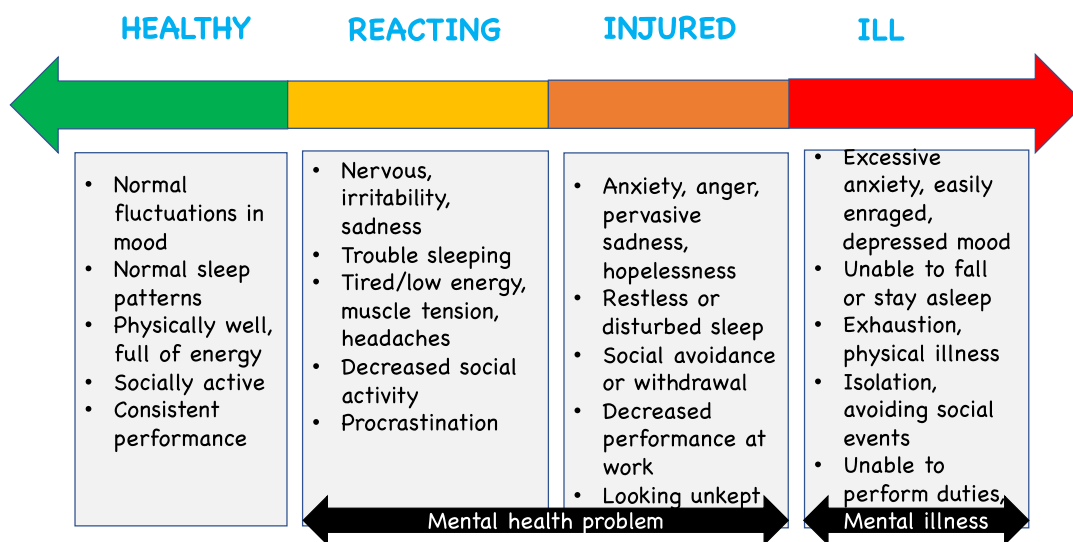
Before we delve into the challenges associated with mental health, what is considered mental health? According to the World Health Organisation, mental health *'is a state of wellbeing wherein every individual realises his or her potential, can cope with the everyday stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to her or his community.'*<sup>3</sup> Many of us

perceive mental health as only negative; however, mental health exists along a continuum from healthy on one end to illness on the other.

### The mental health continuum

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, we navigate along a mental health continuum throughout our lives.<sup>4</sup> Many factors influence how far we move along this continuum, e.g., family history, childhood experiences, lived experience, being disconnected from family and friends, long-term stress, to name but a few.<sup>5</sup>

## Mental Health Continuum Model



SOURCE: Canadian Mental Health Association

Each zone has a collection of symptoms (what the person impacted reports, e.g., feeling tired and irritable) and signs (what others observe, e.g., decreased performance or poor personal hygiene) that flag where a person may be.

In the *healthy zone* (green), a person has good mental health and high levels of resilience. As they move towards the *reacting zone* (yellow), they start to experience difficulties in coping. Following is the *injured zone* (orange), where the level of difficulty in coping is increasing, as is the severity and frequency of symptoms and signs. Finally, in the *ill zone* (red), a person would be experiencing severe symptoms and may be at risk of self-harm or even suicide.

The key is to recognise where a person is along the mental health continuum. Perhaps you may be assessing your position at this moment. Research is clear that the earlier we seek support, the better our long-term mental health outcome will be.<sup>6</sup>

### ***So why is mental health first aid so important?***

Not too dissimilar to physical first aid, mental health first aid is the support provided to a person experiencing a mental health challenge, illness or crisis, while waiting for a professional team to arrive.<sup>6</sup> Below are several reasons why the need for mental health first aiders is so critical?

- **Mental health problems are common.** Around 20% of 16 to 85-year-olds have suffered from a mental health illness in the last 12 months, and as already mentioned, ~45% will suffer from a mental health illness sometime in their life. Young people are particularly susceptible. Research shows that 50% of young people who will suffer from a mental health illness as an adult have their first episode by the age of 18, and 75% by the age of 25.<sup>7</sup> Their developing brain contributes to this increased risk, not to mention societal expectations, peer group pressure and the challenges of trying to make a place for themselves in this world.<sup>7</sup>
- **Many people are not well-informed about mental health.** Most people do not know how to recognise and respond to someone with a mental health challenge or what resources are available to help them. Stigma and discrimination have created myths associated with mental illness. People with mental health challenges must be crazy, weak, or looking for attention. Limited knowledge about mental health causes many people to avoid or not respond to their symptoms of mental health illness or the symptoms and signs of others.
- **Many people with mental health problems do not seek help or delay seeking help.** Suffering in silence is just suffering! Due to the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health, many people choose not to put their hand up and ask for support. Some data shows approximately 65% of those suffering from mental health illness choose not to tell anyone.<sup>8</sup> Some may have attempted to do so in the past and received a bad reception. Others may feel ashamed and burdened by other people, particularly family and friends, who are usually their first support line. Based on research, we know that men tend to suffer in silence much longer than women.<sup>8</sup> Women are more likely to talk about it and seek help from their family and friends or a healthcare professional. Given some societies stance that men should be strong, not cry and 'suck it up' further perpetuates men not seeking support.
- **People with mental health problems may at times not have insight.** When a person is suffering from a mental health illness, the insight into their signs and symptoms may be

impacted. They may not be aware of the full extent of how they are behaving and the impact they are having on other people.

### ***What does mental health first aid look like in action?***

There are several detailed steps involved when providing support to someone with a mental health problem or illness.<sup>6</sup> Below are some of the critical elements that need to be front of mind.

**RECOGNISE:** Recognising the symptoms and signs of a mental health problem or illness is a critical first step. The list of signs and symptoms provided as part of the mental health continuum may help you recognise if a person is struggling.

**APPROACH:** Choosing the right environment when approaching a person is critical. Respect their privacy and confidentiality when initiating a conversation. Remember to ask them directly, e.g., “I notice you have not been yourself lately, and I thought I would check-in”. Giving examples of what you may have noticed will help them understand where you are coming from.

**LISTEN AND TUNE-IN:** Remember to listen without interrupting and coming up with immediate solutions. Being compassionate and non-judgemental will create an environment where the person is more likely to ‘open up’ and share what they are going through. It is essential to watch your body language, e.g., talking to them with your arms folded and looking down at them may give them the perception that you are judging them. Sitting somewhere quiet and looking them in the eye may be more comfortable for them. However, bear in mind cultural differences.

**GIVE SUPPORT:** Giving support and information whilst waiting for professional help to arrive is critical. Support can be in the form of empathy and hope of recovery. You may want to enquire what support they have at home, with family and friends, as well as in their community. Encouraging them to seek professional help is vital. A doctor can conduct a mental health check and ensure they get all the support and resources they need.

**LOOK AFTER YOURSELF:** Some people may feel frustrated, sad, angry and exhausted after providing support to a person in need. They may need to deal with their feelings and reactions that they set aside to help the other person. Finding someone to talk things through is an option; however, the privacy and confidentiality of the person concerned should be upheld. Implementing self-care strategies such as exercising or connecting with others is essential to ensure our wellbeing.

### ***On a final note...***

Having had the opportunity to explore and discuss various aspects of mental health first aid, each member of the Prime Team had the opportunity to share an aha moment or key takeaway. A few shares were repeated numerous times. Below are some of their reflections which will serve as my conclusion.

*“I had never thought of mental health in itself; only that mental health was always problematic. I realise now that you can have good mental health and poor mental health”*

*“I love the mental health continuum and didn’t realise that we all can move along this continuum, some further than others. Staying in the green is important.”*

*“I never realised mental health was such a problem and how young people are at an increased risk.”*

*“I had no idea so many people suffer in silence.”*

*“It’s not about being able to diagnose or treat a person but knowing enough about mental health to provide support in the moments before the paramedics arrive.”*

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