

# Mental health first aid and psychological first aid

## How are they different?

Similar to how traditional first aid helps someone experiencing a physical health crisis, mental health first aid (MHFA) teaches you how to provide initial support to someone experiencing psychological distress until professional help is available. It is primarily designed as an intervention for those with existing psychological illnesses or challenges.

In contrast, Psychological First Aid (PFA) is designed to reduce the risk of psychological injury or illness as a result of exposure to psychosocial hazards in workplaces and other settings.

## The history of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)

MHFA training originated in Australia in 2001. Its aim is to improve mental health literacy in the general community, enable people to identify individuals at risk of mental ill-health, and to assist people experiencing acute symptoms of mental ill-health. Initially, a short MHFA training course was developed, comparable to conventional first aid training. An evaluation of this training led to the course content and duration being extended.<sup>i</sup> By 2024, MHFA had been exported to more than 30 countries and about 7 million people worldwide had been trained in MHFA (1.3 million of which are in Australia).<sup>ii</sup>



## What does MHFA training entail?

- Typically conducted as a 12-hour course over two days.
- Varied training pathways and tailored curriculums are offered.
- Trainees learn about the cause and symptoms of psychological conditions and how to apply the MHFA action plan.

## What are the benefits of MHFA?

Systematic reviews and evaluation studies of MHFA have found that there is evidence that MHFA improves awareness and understanding of mental health and ill-health.<sup>iii</sup> However, there is currently insufficient evidence that it improves workers' mental health or leads to sustained first aid competency.<sup>iv</sup>

Noting the purpose for which it is designed, MHFA should not be relied on as a psychosocial risk control measure alone. Other measures should be in place that either eliminate or minimise psychosocial risks to workers.

Training workers in MHFA may be of benefit in workplaces if:

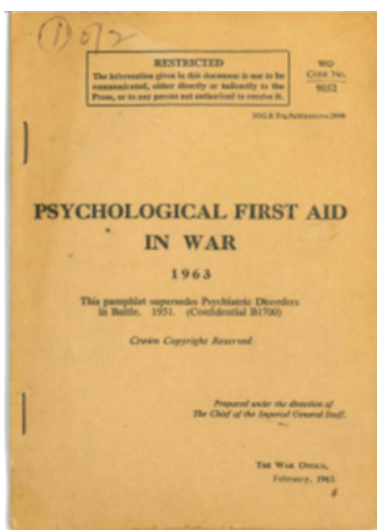
- workers with psychological conditions or challenges identify a need for persons with MHFA skills to be present in the workplace to support them
- it is delivered in a way that does not overwhelm trainees with information that may have a distressing effect, rather than a positive effect in terms of knowledge, attitudes and behaviour<sup>v</sup>
- workers are given the option of opting out of MHFA training if they are not comfortable with the subject matter.

## The history of Psychological First Aid (PFA)

PFA was first introduced during World War II and was primarily designed for use in humanitarian support settings. While it is beneficial for workers in first responder and acute health care roles, it is suitable for use for any persons and in any context.

It is a method of providing support to persons in the immediate aftermath of potentially traumatic or stressful events. It is designed to reduce immediate distress and mitigate the risk of poor post-event psychological adjustment.

It is a 'strengths-based approach' in that it aims to build on people's strengths and resources rather than focus on their vulnerabilities or problems.



Psychological  
FIRST AID



LOOK  
LISTEN  
LINK

## What does PFA training entail?

- Three or four hours delivered online or face to face.
- Covers how to apply a simple 'Look, Listen, Link' process: a basic needs assessment, nonjudgmental listening and referral to tailored supports when indicated.
- Apart from understanding how potentially traumatic experiences can affect people, it does not require knowledge of psychological conditions or mental ill-health.<sup>vi</sup>

## What are the benefits of PFA?

PFA is primarily designed to mitigate the psychological impact of stressful events. Research evidence supports the benefits of PFA as a method for reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and distress following stressful events or critical incidents.<sup>vii</sup>

PFA is recommended by Phoenix Australia, which sets the national clinical guidelines on the prevention and treatment of acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorders.<sup>viii</sup>

PFA is designed based on the following principles and practices of trauma-informed care:

- responses to potentially traumatic or stressful events are regarded as normal reactions to abnormal events
- resilience and belief in recovery is promoted through simple, low-intensity support which encourages people to draw on their strengths.

## Caveat for both MHFA and PFA

Workers with existing (or recovering from) psychological conditions or challenges are generally discouraged from participating in the training or application of MHFA or PFA. This minimises the risk of poor or delayed recovery due to exposure to any stressors during the training and delivery of support to others.

i Kitchener B A and Jorm A F (2008). Mental health first aid: an international programme for early intervention. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*; 2 (1) 55-61.

ii [mhfa.com.au](http://mhfa.com.au)

ii Forthal, S., Sadowska, K., Pike, K. M., Balachander, M., Jacobsson, K., and Hermosilla, S. (2022). Mental health first aid: A systematic review of trainee behavior and recipient mental health outcomes. *Psychiatric Services*, 73(4), 439-446; Richardson, R., Dale, H. E., Robertson, L., Meader, N., Wellby, G., McMillan, D., and Churchill, R. (2023). Mental Health First Aid as a tool for improving mental health and well-being. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, (8); Health and Safety Executive UK (2018). Summary of the evidence on the effectiveness of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training in the workplace, Derbyshire, UK: HSE.

iv Forthal, S., Sadowska, K., Pike, K. M., Balachander, M., Jacobsson, K., and Hermosilla, S. (2022). Mental health first aid: A systematic review of trainee behavior and recipient mental health outcomes. *Psychiatric Services*, 73(4), 439-446; Richardson, R., Dale, H. E., Robertson, L., Meader, N., Wellby, G., McMillan, D., and Churchill, R. (2023). Mental Health First Aid as a tool for improving mental health and well-being. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, (8); Health and Safety Executive UK (2018). Summary of the evidence on the effectiveness of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training in the workplace, Derbyshire, UK: HSE.

v Corrigan, P. (2018). Beware the educational fix: limitations of efforts to promote mental health literacy. *Psychiatric Services*, 69:4; Foulkes, L., and Andrews, J. L. (2023). Are mental health awareness efforts contributing to the rise in reported mental health problems? A call to test the prevalence inflation hypothesis. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 69, 101010; Heron, R. J., Kawakami, N., Thirumalai, R., Morganstein, J. C., Jetly, R., Glozier, N., and Greenberg, N. (2024). The world's psychiatrists update their position on workforce mental health. *Occupational Medicine*, kqad143.

vi [education.phoenixaustralia.org/product?catalog=Psychological-First-Aid](http://education.phoenixaustralia.org/product?catalog=Psychological-First-Aid); [firstaid.redcross.org.au/psychological-first-aid](http://firstaid.redcross.org.au/psychological-first-aid)

vii Clarner, A., Uter, W., Ruhman, L., Wrenger, N., Martin, A., and Drexler, H. (2017). Sickness absence among peer-supported drivers after occupational trauma. *Occupational Medicine*, 67(2), 143-150; Hermosilla, S., Forthal, S., Sadowska, K., Magill, E. B., Watson, P., and Pike, K. M. (2023). We need to build the evidence: A systematic review of psychological first aid on mental health and well-being. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 36(1), 5-16.

vii [education.phoenixaustralia.org/product?catalog=Psychological-Fir](http://education.phoenixaustralia.org/product?catalog=Psychological-Fir); Phoenix Australia and the National Health and Medical Research Council (2022). Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Complex PTSD, [phoenixaustralia.org/australian-guidelines-for-ptsd](http://phoenixaustralia.org/australian-guidelines-for-ptsd)



See the [SafeWork SA website](https://www.safeworksa.gov.au) for more information about psychosocial risk management



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