



## *Mental Health First Aid Training*

One in four Americans lives with a mental health problem each year. Yet, far too many – up to two-thirds – go without treatment. Just as CPR training helps a layperson without medical training assist an individual following a heart attack, Mental Health First Aid training helps a layperson assist someone experiencing a mental health crisis.

### **Background**

In 2001, Mental Health First Aid was created by Professor Tony Jorm, a respected mental health literacy professor, and Betty Kitchener, a nurse specializing in health education and is auspiced at the University of Melbourne. Five published studies in Australia show that the program saves lives, improves the mental health of the individual administering care *and* the one receiving it, expands knowledge of mental illnesses and their treatments, increases services provided and reduces overall stigma by improving mental health “literacy”. For further evidence supporting the implementation of Mental Health First Aid, please see the Australian Mental Health First Aid website: <http://www.mhfa.com.au/>. In order to increase public understanding of these disorders and improve treatment for those affected by them, the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare piloted Mental Health First Aid in 2008. The program has been replicated in England, Scotland, Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland and Singapore in addition to the United States.

### **About the Course**

The Mental Health First Aid Program is an interactive session which runs 12 hours. It can be conducted as one two-day seminar, two one day events spaced over a short period of time or as four 3-hour sessions. Mental Health First Aid certification must be renewed every three years, and introduces participants to risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems, builds understanding of their impact and overviews common treatments.

Specifically, participants learn:

- The potential risk factors and warning signs for a range of mental health problems, including: depression, anxiety/trauma, psychosis and psychotic disorders, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and self-injury
- An understanding of the prevalence of various mental health disorders in the U.S. and the need for reduced stigma in their communities
- A 5-step action plan encompassing the skills, resources and knowledge to assess the situation, to select and implement appropriate interventions, and to help the individual in crisis connect with appropriate professional care
- The appropriate professional, peer, social and self-help resources available to help someone with a mental health problem.

### **Who should become a Mental Health First Aider?**

Specific audiences for each training vary, but include hospitals and federally qualified health centers, state policymakers, employers and chambers of commerce, faith communities, school personnel, state police and corrections staff, nursing home staff, mental health authorized support staff, young people, families and the general public.

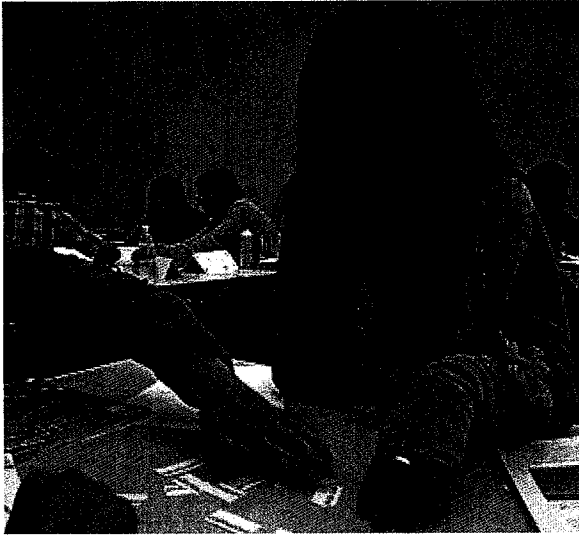
### **Mental Health First Aid in your Community**

The National Council envisions that Mental Health First Aid will become as common as CPR and First Aid training during the next decade. The National Council certifies community providers to implement Mental Health First Aid in communities throughout the United States. Each Mental Health First Aid site develops individualized plans to reach their communities, but all deliver the core 12-hour program and each participating site undergoes tight credentialing to guarantee fidelity to the original, tested model, while also maintaining the flexibility necessary to reach its unique citizens’ needs and demographics.

For more information about the program or to request the training, please contact Dawn Roy at [ladyroy@earthlink.net](mailto:ladyroy@earthlink.net) or (203) 331-7458.

# Mental First Aid: How To Help In An Emotional Crisis

by KELLEY WEISS



Enlarge

Kelley Weiss for NPR

Nikki Perez struggled after being diagnosed with mental illness. A course is training her how to help others in crisis.

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When Nikki Perez was in her 20s, she had a job as a lab tech at a hospital in Sacramento, Calif. She said everything was going well until one day, when something changed.

"I worked in a very sterile environment, and so part of the procedure was to wash your hands," she said. "I found myself washing my hands more and more, to the point where they were raw, and sometimes they would bleed."

Perez went to the doctor and was diagnosed with something she had never even heard of — obsessive-compulsive disorder. At the time she was living with her parents. She quit her job and went on short-term disability.

Researchers say 1 in 4 adults has a mental disorder. But while many Americans are trained in first aid and CPR to respond to medical emergencies, few are prepared to help others experiencing a mental health crisis.

Perez said her illness turned her life upside down. She would sit in her parents' room watching TV on the floor, afraid to move. She didn't want to get caught up in the obsessive routines around the house.

"You check locks, check the washer, check the doors, check the window — I did a lot of checking," she said.

Overall, it was profoundly isolating. Her family, like many people, didn't know how to handle mental illness.

Finally, she got treatment, but her experience made her want to learn more about mental health issues so she could help others in crisis.

## Emotional Crises More Common Than Heart Attacks

She found just the right class, called Mental Health First Aid. Bryan Gibb is the director of public education for the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, which runs the course.

"We often train to know CPR or the Heimlich maneuver or first aid. But the reality is, it's much more likely that we're going to come in contact with someone suffering from an emotional crisis than someone suffering a heart attack or choking in a restaurant," he said.

In a 12-hour course, Gibb teaches people how to identify different types of mental illness:

depression, anxiety disorders, psychosis, eating disorders and substance abuse.

Part of the learning process involves group exercises. Nikki Perez participated in one that simulated what it's like for people who hear voices. She tried to have a conversation while someone whispered in her ear "don't trust him," "you're a failure," and "is he looking at you?"

After the class, members who get this firsthand perspective of the different symptoms of mental illness then learn how to approach someone who's having a psychotic episode. They're told to speak calmly and clearly, and not to dismiss or challenge the person about their hallucinations.

### **Direct Questions For The Suicidal**

As with any first-aid course, there's an Action Plan for what to do if someone's in crisis: assess the person for risk of harm or suicide, listen non-judgmentally, give reassurance, and encourage the person to seek professional help.

Gibb says that for this to work, people need to force themselves to ask direct questions: Are you thinking of killing yourself? Do you have a plan? Do you have the things you need to complete that plan?

Gibb told the class to never leave an actively suicidal person alone and to call the police if the person has a weapon or is acting aggressively.

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Longtime mental health advocates with the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, say courses like this raise awareness about mental illness. Jessica Cruz, executive director of NAMI California, said this reduces the stigma around getting help.

"If people know that others are trained in how to deal with a crisis situation, they may even reach out for help before they even get to that crisis point," she said.

Cruz is so impressed with the course, her own staff is going to be trained next month.

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just like CPR," Cruz said.

That's already under way at schools, the workplace and churches. Since it started three years ago, more than 30,000 people have been trained around the country; another 20,000 are expected to get training by the end of the year.

Perez says she would recommend this course to anyone.

"I think it's one of the best things that I've ever done for myself so far," she said.

The National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare said thousands of people like Perez now have the skills to help those experiencing a mental health crisis. But the group emphasized that this is first-aid training and should be used to keep someone safe and stabilized until the professional help arrives, just like if you're responding to someone having a heart attack.