

Mental Health First Aid: A Crucial Tool during Crisis

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In times of crisis, whether caused by natural disasters, pandemics, or personal emergencies, the immediate focus often centers on physical survival and safety. However, the psychological impact of these events can be equally devastating and long-lasting. Mental health first aid (MHFA) has emerged as a critical component in the comprehensive response to crises, providing support, reducing stigma, and promoting recovery. As we navigate an increasingly uncertain world, the integration of MHFA into crisis response strategies is more vital than ever.

Mental health first aid is a set of strategies designed to provide initial support to individuals experiencing mental health challenges or crises. Much like traditional first aid, which aims to stabilize physical injuries until professional help is available; MHFA aims to stabilize mental health conditions. It empowers individuals to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, offer initial help, and guide those affected towards appropriate professional resources.

The concept of MHFA, developed in Australia in 2000, has since gained global attention. Its core principles are encapsulated in the ALGEE action plan: "A"pproach, "L"isten non-judgmentally, "G"ive support and information, "E"ncourage appropriate professional help, and "E"ncourage

other supports. This approach is designed to be accessible, easy to remember, and effective in a variety of situations, making it a powerful tool for laypersons and professionals alike.¹

Crises can exacerbate existing mental health conditions or trigger new ones. Natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, for example, can lead to increased rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the profound mental health impacts of prolonged social isolation, fear of illness, and economic instability.

During such times, MHFA can play a pivotal role in mitigating the psychological toll on affected populations. First and foremost, it promotes early identification and intervention. By equipping individuals with the skills to recognize early warning signs of mental distress, MHFA enables timely support, which is crucial in preventing the escalation of symptoms.^{2,3}

Moreover, MHFA helps reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues, which often serves as a barrier to seeking help. By fostering a culture of openness and support, MHFA encourages people to discuss their mental health concerns without fear of judgment or discrimination. This is particularly important during crises, when stigma can be heightened due to the acute stress and uncertainty people face.

Despite its proven benefits, MHFA faces several challenges. One significant obstacle is the need for widespread training and education. To be effective, MHFA must be accessible to a broad segment of the population, which requires investment in training programs and public awareness campaigns. Additionally, cultural sensitivity is crucial; MHFA strategies must be adapted to reflect the diverse beliefs, values, and practices of different communities to ensure their effectiveness. Another challenge is the integration of MHFA into formal crisis response frameworks. While MHFA is valuable, it should not replace professional mental health services but rather complement them. Clear protocols for collaboration between MHFA providers and mental health professionals are necessary to ensure seamless referrals and comprehensive care.

As we continue to face global challenges, the expansion of MHFA training programs, both in-person and online, is essential. Increasing access to MHFA training will enable more people to provide support during crises. Additionally, ongoing research is needed to evaluate the long-term outcomes of MHFA interventions.

Professor Dr. Md. Abu Taher

Professor,

Department of Psychiatry

North Bengal Medical College, Sirajganj

Bangladesh.

✉taher.dr@gmail.com

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