

Mental Health First Aid: Rural residents procure skills to access professional and self-care resources

Lakshmi Mahadevan, Ph.D., an Associate Professor and Extension Specialist empowers Mental Health First Aiders

Beginning March 2020, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife Extension) launched the “Reducing Opioid Use and Misuse through Mental Health First Aid in Rural Texas” (MHFA_RTX) project funded through a Rural Health and Safety Education grant awarded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

MHFA_RTX seeks to teach people to identify and address a potential mental illness, challenges, or substance use disorder among fellow rural citizens by implementing ALGEE safely and responsibly.

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm.
- Listen nonjudgmentally.
- Give reassurance and information.
- Encourage appropriate professional help.
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

Taking the fear out of discussing mental health

MHFA for adults takes the fear and hesitation out of starting conversations about mental health and substance use problems by giving individuals experiencing mental health challenges “hope with facts”. Mental Health First Aiders are trained to strategically identify and gather information about available mental and physical health resources and empower individuals to self-help in the interim. This is accomplished by training centred on:

1. Refraining from advising individuals about undertaking a specific course of action but instead providing a variety of options so that they may make personally appropriate decisions.
2. Reminding individuals that they can choose to discontinue or choose alternate means of care as needed.
3. Emphasising that resources such as the National Suicide Prevention Hotline or 988 are accessible 24/7.
4. Helping individuals identify a friend, family member or colleague who can serve as their peer support.
5. Encouraging individuals to seek out and identify alternate technologies for accessing counsellors or therapists who provide services virtually – for example via phone or free internet and/or computers in the local library.
6. Identifying resources such as peer support specialists who conduct in-person or virtual

group therapy.

7. Talking with individuals about self-care practices that led them to feel better in the past.

8. Encouraging individuals to practice self-care and adjust, add to or replace practices as needed.

9. Understanding that practicing self-care as a Mental Health First Aider is not selfish and can enhance the MHFA experience before, during and after for all concerned.

MHFA_RTX grant has trained over 312 Texans to be Mental Health First Aiders

As of 2022, of those trained, 90% indicated that their knowledge of mental health challenges, signs, and symptoms has improved. 85% of participants reported appreciation for [the MHFA action plan](#) and the potential for preventing, intervening and recovery for fellow rural citizens experiencing mental health challenges. 80% of participants felt that they would not find it difficult to refer someone showing signs and symptoms of mental health or substance use challenge to practical resources such as the hotline or self-help information. Over 90% of participants felt empowered to create a self-care plan before providing MHFA to cope with any feelings that may arise after the MHFA event.

“MHFA_RTX seeks to teach people to identify and address a potential mental illness, challenges, or substance use disorder among fellow rural citizens by implementing ALGEE safely and responsibly.”

Participant testimonial: “This course surpassed all of my expectations in its ability to educate me in a way that I still remember the material that was presented to me and in a way that I feel excited to be able to practice the skills I learned. In this case, being excited means that I am more hopeful and feel less helpless when I come to situations where I can recognise that someone may be struggling through a mental challenge and I have the unique opportunity to help them. After this course, I feel that I am much better equipped both with evidence- driven tools and with self-care techniques to be able to not only provide mental health first aid, but also remain cognizant in all areas of any interaction.”

The USDA funded, “Reducing Opioid Use and Misuse through Mental Health First Aid in Rural Texas” grant is focused on and has been effectively working to offset barriers posed by ruralised culture, stigma and lack of awareness of available resources. Additionally, by encouraging self-care, and providing information about immediately accessible resources Mental Health First Aiders are empowering more rural Texas adult residents to act without delay thus increasing the likelihood of preventing a mental health-related crisis.

Please Note: This is a Commercial Profile



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

