



# THE ROLE OF MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDERS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

**Around 20,000 workplaces have Mental Health First Aiders within them and others have equivalents such as mental health advocates and mental health champions. With everyone working remotely, how can these individuals provide much needed support to their colleagues in these uncertain times, while also being supported themselves? We spoke to Simon Blake, CEO of MHFA England, as well as CMHA members about the role that Mental Health First Aiders or equivalents can play.**

## **How Mental Health First Aiders can support colleagues when remote working:**

- Set up virtual drop-ins with Mental Health First Aiders, either on an individual basis or in groups. Many Mental Health First Aiders are currently taking responsibility for encouraging social connection as people adapt to platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams;
- Communicate to employees who the available Mental Health First Aiders are and how to access them;
- Encourage people to speak to Mental Health First Aiders over video call, rather than just using audio. This can help Mental Health First Aiders pick up on some non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, posture and body language;
- Mental Health First Aiders should be given clear information on what support is now available to employees as this may have changed in the current working environment. For example, are on-site psychologists now accessible through virtual sessions?
- Mental Health First Aiders can then play a role in getting mental health information and advice out to people who are working remotely to ensure they know the ways to keep themselves healthy and where they can access support.

## **Supporting furloughed workers**

- Organisations can communicate to furloughed workers that they still have access to Mental Health First Aiders (if they are still working);
- An organisation might have furloughed workers who are Mental Health First Aiders/Mental Health Advocates/Mental Health Champions. People may want to volunteer their skills, experience and commitment to mental health to do what they can in their workplace, community or wider society. Help them to find opportunities that are available to them.



# PRACTICAL ACTIONS

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## CMHA member example: PwC

- PwC has approximately 200 staff who have identified themselves as wanting to act as MHFAiders. Most are in the firm's HR teams but also from a range of other, mostly pastoral, roles;
- To support Mental Health First Aiders PwC is offering short catch up sessions to share a couple of scenarios as used in the MHFA England workbook. This is to help trained staff improve confidence and remind themselves of what constitutes a crisis situation;
- The firm has written guidance for all its MHFA trained staff. It outlines the need to ensure their own self care, make sure they keep to first aid only, lines of escalation and consultation and what resources are available to them for support (e.g. team networks and the EAP);
- To measure impact of Mental Health First Aiders, PwC has conducted a short survey of its MHFA trained staff to ask simple questions such as: 'Have you used any aspect your MHFA training at work?' and 'Have you used any aspect your MHFA training out of work?'
- PwC currently has a member of staff completing their instructor training for the MHFA refresher course so the firm can ensure all its MHFA trained staff are kept up to date.

## Supporting Mental Health First Aiders

Many people who put themselves forward to train as Mental Health First Aiders are empathetic people who want to provide support to others. However, it's important to have a frank conversation with your Mental Health First Aiders about whether they are happy and comfortable to do this role remotely. If they are, Mental Health First Aiders should be reminded that they can only be a support to someone else if they are physically and mentally well enough themselves. Employers should therefore keep communicating with Mental Health First Aiders that they need to think about their own self-care and own boundaries first before helping others. Catch up with your Mental Health First Aiders once a week and keep encouraging them to check in with themselves to make sure they are well enough to do the job.

## RESOURCES

- CMHA: interview with Simon Blake, CEO of MHFA England [View resource](#)
- MHFA: supporting people remotely (page 5): [View resource](#)
- MHFA: a message from one Mental Health First Aider to another: you can't pour from an empty cup: [View resource](#)
- MHFA: Supporting your mental health while working from home: [View resource](#)
- CMHA: coronavirus resources: [View resource](#)

## CONTACT

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- If you or your teams would like to have virtual MHFA training, including refresher courses, please contact [Alison@citymha.org.uk](mailto:Alison@citymha.org.uk)