

Literature Review: Mental Health First Aid and Emotional CPR

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Description: Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an 8-hour mental health literacy program in which laypeople learn the signs and symptoms of behavioral health problems and crises, ways to support those who are facing a crisis, and where to refer for appropriate professional care (SAMHSA, 2016). Developed in 2000 by Betty Kitchener AM and Professor Tony Jorm, Mental Health First Aid Australia is a national not-for-profit organization focused on mental health training and research. According to the official Mental Health First Aid website (mhfa.com.au), Mental Health First Aid is the help provided to a person who is developing a mental health problem, experiencing a worsening of a mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves. Ingrid Donato, Chief of the Mental Health Promotion Branch in SAMHSA's Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), likens the program to physical health first aid. Instead of helping people understand how to identify the signs of a heart attack or to stabilize a broken bone, they are taught how to identify and triage behavioral health issues (SAMHSA, 2016). Participants are taught how to assess for risk, how to listen, how to provide reassurance and support, and how to connect those who are at risk with the appropriate professional services. These are taught in a five-step action plan: 1) Assess for risk of suicide or harm 2) Listen nonjudgmentally 3) Give reassurance and information 4) Encourage appropriate professional help and 5) Encourage self-help and other support strategies (SAMHSA NREPP, 2016). In many communities, Mental Health First Aid training programs are being supplemented with other behavioral health programs such as Emotional CPR (eCPR). Like Mental Health First Aid, eCPR aims to guide laypeople to help those who are experiencing a mental health crisis (SAMHSA, 2016). Emotional CPR is a community education program of the National Empowerment Center (NEC) and was created by a diverse group of people who themselves have experienced emotional crisis (<http://emotional-cpr.org/about-ecpr.htm>). It was developed out of the premise that emotional crisis represents an opportunity for deeper self-awareness, growth, and connectedness with others. With eCPR the public health education program is designed by people with behavioral health conditions to teach others how to help those who are experiencing an emotional crisis. Those who are trained in eCPR are better able to understand and assist those who are exhibiting behavior that is brought on by an emotional crisis, and to provide the support needed to work through a crisis. With eCPR, peers and laypeople are trained in how to talk to someone who is facing a crisis and identify how to get that person the right help. Emotional CPR has a three-step action plan 1) Connecting 2) empowering 3) Revitalizing (<http://emotional-cpr.org/about-ecpr.htm>).

Research Summary: Mental Health First Aid is a SAMHSA recognized evidence based practice and many studies have been done to evaluate the program's effectiveness. A randomized control trial was done in South Australian high schools evaluating the effectiveness of MHFA training in high school teachers. Teachers at 7 schools received training and those at another 7 were wait-listed for future training. The effects of the training on teachers were evaluated using questionnaires pre- and post-training and at 6-month follow-up. The questionnaires assessed mental health knowledge, stigmatizing attitudes, confidence in providing help to others, help actually provided, school policy and procedures, and teacher mental health. The indirect effects on students were evaluated using questionnaires at pre-training and at follow-up which assessed any mental health help and information received from school staff, and also the mental health of the student. The results showed that the training increased teachers' knowledge, changed beliefs about treatment to be more like those of mental health professionals, reduced some aspects of stigma, and increased confidence in providing help to students and colleagues. There was an indirect effect on students, who reported receiving more mental health information from school staff. Most of the changes found were sustained 6 months after training (Jorm, 2010). Another study looked at MHFA that was provided to teens themselves in high schools, ages 15-18. Across four schools, 988 students received the teen MHFA program. 520 students with a mean age of 16 years completed the baseline questionnaire, 345 completed the post-test and 241 completed the three-month follow-up. Statistically significant improvements were found in mental health literacy, confidence in providing Mental Health First Aid to a peer, help-seeking intentions and student mental health, while stigmatizing attitudes significantly reduced (Hart, 2016). Another recent study done in the U.S. looked at the effectiveness of a Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) program in Maryland.

The study used a pre versus post design to assess the ability of social service employees to generate appropriate strategies to use in hypothetical situations featuring a young person in distress, before versus after participation in the 8-hr YMHFA training. Trainee responses demonstrated significant overall improvement by including four of the five central YMHFA strategies significantly more often after training. Increased confidence in, likelihood of, and comfort with helping a young person in emotional distress or crisis were also reported post-training compared to pre-training. Results suggest that individuals participating in YMHFA training are better informed regarding when to assess for risk of suicide, listen nonjudgmentally, encourage appropriate professional help, and encourage self-help strategies with young people in psychological distress (Aakre, 2016).

Both MHFA and eCPR are similar programs that aim to educate communities about behavioral health problems and crises. Since eCPR is a newer program, there is no literature or studies which have been conducted to test its effectiveness. The literature is clear however that MHFA and YMHFA has been proven to be effective and has been recognized by SAMHSA as an evidence based program.

References:

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