Mental health needs first aid too - building the foundations for a mentally healthy campus.

The University of Western Australia

The Western Australian Mental Health Good Outcome Awards 2007

Category Seven: Mental health promotion and mental illness prevention

September 2007
Executive Summary
The University of Western Australia’s mental health promotion began with the recognition that one in five Australians will experience a mental illness at some stage and that many mental health issues first appear in adolescence or early adulthood. This corresponds with the age of many people who study at university. Moreover, the pressure of study can sometimes combine with environmental and social factors to place this group at additional risk. UWA first initiated a coordinated and collaborative approach to improve mental health literacy through the introduction of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training for staff and students in April 2005. Initial funding was provided through the University’s Diversity Initiative Fund. To date approximately 200 participants have completed the training and a further 61 are in progress. Future plans involve implementing Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) in 2007 and the possibility of introducing a specialised Aboriginal MHFA Program and culturally and linguistically modified MHFA courses for Croatian, Vietnamese and Italian.

Background
The UWA community consists of more than 3,500 staff and 18,000 students. It is interesting to reflect that a place of this size contains a greater diversity of community than could be found in many towns in Australia. Moreover, each member of the campus community is linked to family, friends and associates living across the city, the regions, the nation and in other countries.

This unique characteristic of a campus population means that each mental health intervention offered to the UWA community has a greater potential to provide a benefit beyond the individual participant. It can contribute to the well-being of the external communities in which each staff member or student lives and operates.

At the same time, some of the students and staff at UWA have come from other countries and are isolated from their usual support networks of family and friends. The usual stresses and challenges associated with striving for academic, vocational and social success are made even more difficult for them by an unfamiliar culture. UWA recognises the potential for such problems to affect not only the individual but to inhibit the success of the organisation and the healthy functioning of its community. We each have a stake in our own mental health and the mental health of those around us.

For these reasons, mental health promotion at UWA aims to sustain the emotional well-being of the overall university population within its wider social context. The overall goal is to raise awareness and understanding of the needs of people with mental illness and to support individual future success through early intervention and prevention.

Across all initiatives we have tried to recognise the needs of those who are currently well (illness prevention skills and education), those at risk of developing mental health problems as well as those experiencing mental health problems.

This project aligns with two priority objectives articulated in the University’s Operational Priorities Plan (2006 – 2008):
- To improve the student learning environment and provision of facilities and services both within and beyond the classroom, and
To recruit, develop and retain the highest quality staff, supporting development of their full potential, within a ‘one staff-one University’ philosophy.

**Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)**

The Mental Health First Aid Program was developed in 2001 at the Centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University by Betty Kitchener and Professor Tony Jorm. In 2005 the Program moved to ORYGEN Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. It is a 12-hour course whose goal is to improve the mental health literacy of the Australian community. *Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)* training for staff and students at UWA commenced in April 2005.

Course participants develop skills to manage potential or developing mental health problems for themselves, fellow students or work colleagues. They learn to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, where and how to get help and what sort of help has been shown by research to be effective. More information can be found at [www.mhfa.com.au](http://www.mhfa.com.au)

Improving mental health literacy is an essential component of any strategy to reduce mental health problems. It was in this context that the objectives of the program were established.

**Objectives**

The objectives of this program within the University setting are to:

- Build the capacity of the organisation to promote positive mental health and wellbeing in a coordinated and collaborative way;
- Raise awareness and understanding of the needs of people with mental health illness within the UWA community;
- Provide support through effective education regarding early intervention and prevention services; and
- Raise mental health literacy within the UWA community

**Implementation**

It has been exciting and encouraging to witness the extent that UWA has embraced and supported this program and to receive strong support for its implementation by organisations external to the UWA community.

The MHFA project was initiated on campus in four phases;

**Phase 1: 2004 – Building alliances**

To establish a collaborative project across a number of areas staff were recruited to become MHFA trainers from relevant on-campus service groups in regular contact with the campus population; Health Promotion, Safety and Health and Counselling. Initial funding was provided by UWA’s Diversity Initiative Fund and training was completed in 2004.

**Phase 2: 2005 (ongoing) – Building capacity**

The Senate Select Committee on Mental Health was one of the most comprehensive investigations into the state of mental health in Australia. It recommended specifically a strategy to train 6% of the Australian population in MHFA and to specifically target people most likely to deal with the effects of mental health issues - teachers, police, welfare workers and family carers.
To date 197 UWA participants (134 staff, 63 students) have completed the MHFA training and a further 61 are in progress (28 staff, 33 students). This represents 4.2% of staff at UWA – a significant contribution to the national target.

**Phase 3: 2006 – Celebrating success**

A celebration of the Mental Health First Aid project was held at The University Club to celebrate and acknowledge the commitment of staff and students who had completed Mental Health First Aid training at UWA. The event was opened by the Vice Chancellor, Professor Alan Robson and speakers included Senator Ruth Webber (Member of the Select Committee on Mental Health) as well as three staff members and one student who had completed the training and who spoke of its impact on their awareness and understanding.

**Phase 4: 2007-2008 – Building further success**

The project has been integrated into existing structures, existing positions and accountability processes to achieve sustainability. A specialised Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) program commenced in 2007 designed to train adults to assist young people in mental health crisis situation and/or the early stages of mental health problems including self harm and suicide. All UWA MHFA trainers will have achieved accreditation during 2007. Future initiatives involve the possibility of introducing a specialised Aboriginal MHFA Program which is aimed to be culturally sensitive for delivery to Aboriginal People, and the culturally and linguistically modified MHFA courses that are now available for Croatian, Vietnamese and Italian communities.
Summary and evaluation against award criteria

Overall, we believe the MHFA program as implemented by UWA meets the range of criteria nominated under Category 7 of the Western Australian Mental Health Good Outcomes Awards 2007. Specifically the program has

1) Improved the quality, effectiveness and reach of mental health promotion and mental illness prevention strategies; and

2) Raised mental health awareness in the community and promoted the reduction of stigma attached to mental illness

MHFA training has increased the number of graduates and future leaders who have an understanding and commitment to work effectively to promote positive mental health beyond the UWA community.

3) Demonstrated effective consultation and collaboration with relevant stakeholders and the wider community.

A number of partnerships have been established and developed during planning and implementation and these were significant to the success of this project. Community support for the project is demonstrated by the number of staff and student participants, the continuing demand for courses as well as the number of enquiries received from other organisations. The University groups involved with the project include:

- The Health Promotion Unit (University Medical Centre)
- Safety and Health
- Counselling and Psychological Services
- Equity and Diversity
- Organisational and Staff Development Services
- Library Services
- UWA Local Drug Action Group

4) Reduced the stigma of mental illness; is based on sound evidence; verifies effectiveness by quality assurance, utilisation review, and outcomes evaluation.

The MHFA Training and Research Program are well evaluated in the workplace and community setting. It was found to be effective in improving mental health literacy, reducing stigma and increasing helping behaviours. Research into its effectiveness is ongoing and four studies have been published to date (available at www.mhfa.com.au). In addition evaluation data is collected and reviewed following all UWA courses.

Testimonials and concluding remarks

"Following the delivery of the Mental Health First Aid course for the staff at the UWA Library I have noticed three very different positive outcomes;

- Recently a visitor to the library demonstrated behaviour that suggested a mental health problem. Library staff acted in a calm, efficient and appropriate manner in line with the training that they had recently received.
- Staff seem to have a better awareness of their own mental health,
- Staff reported that the course was not only interesting and informative but that the nature of group discussion had generated a camaraderie and cohesiveness between staff members.”
"Even having completed an undergraduate degree in psychology and a Master's degree which featured several units in mental health, I did not feel I had the practical skills with which to approach a mental health crisis such as a panic attack or suicide risk. I believe a Certificate in MHFA is just as important as the Senior First Aid Certificate which I was required to complete for my studies. In fact, given that 1 in 5 Australian adults will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime; this course should be a requirement for everyone."

Kath Jones Student
Nov 2005

UWA is the first Western Australian university to have made MHFA training widely available for staff and students and is thereby leading by example in this area.
References

Appendices / Supporting Documents
1. Uni News Article: 21st March 2005
3. Invitation to Celebration: September 2006
MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS FIRST AID TOO

The University of Western Australia is taking positive steps to improve awareness of mental health issues on campus. Since May 2005, the University has offered its staff and students an innovative Mental Health First Aid course that teaches first aid skills for mental health crisis situations and the early stages of mental health problems.

The course aims to improve knowledge about mental health problems and to encourage people to talk about mental health issues. Participants who have benefited from recent UWA Mental Health First Aid training courses will be invited to attend an inaugural afternoon tea to share stories and celebrate successes in breaking the stigma associated with mental health. The afternoon tea will be held on Thursday the 5th October 2006 and Senator Ruth Webber and Vice Chancellor Alan Robson will address the gathering.

Mental Health First Aid training teaches participants how to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, how to provide initial help and how to go about guiding a person towards appropriate professional help. The course was developed at the Centre for Mental Health Research, Australian National University.

UWA is the first university in Western Australia to deliver the course to students and staff members. Four university staff members are accredited to conduct Mental Health First Aid training.

Since its inception in May 2005, over 200 university students and staff have completed the course. UWA has received requests from the community for this training and a limited number of places are offered in courses to community members. UWA recognises that mental health literacy is an issue for society and that we have a role to play in promoting and supporting mental health. Feedback regarding the course indicates that it has produced a number of positive outcomes.

MEDIA REFERENCES: Tricia Wylde, Senior Health Promotion Officer, 6488 4651

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