



## Freshers' Week 2017: Mental Health First Aid course for university students and staff launches in England

**[Monday 18 September, 09:15 BST]** Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England today announced the launch of a training course designed to support the mental health of students and staff in universities across England. The new Higher Education MHFA One Day course has been launched at the start of the Freshers Week season to enable students and staff to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, which can occur for some students during this transition phase.

Developed in collaboration with Student Minds, and following a successful pilot study and evaluation conducted by academics from the University of Chester,<sup>1</sup> the Higher Education MHFA course is now available to universities all over England. Those who take the course will gain the skills and confidence to spot the signs of mental health issues within a university environment, intervene to offer first aid and guide someone towards the support they may need.

Mental health is a topic of growing concern for young people, with students considered particularly vulnerable – it's estimated that 75% of all mental health issues develop by age 24,<sup>2</sup> meaning that university years coincide with the peak age of onset. Transitioning to and moving through student life can present a number of challenges impacting individual wellbeing including; housing, relationships, academic work, employment pressures and changes to lifestyle and support networks. Recent data published by The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has also shown a 210% increase over five years in the number of students with mental health issues leaving courses early,<sup>3</sup> prompting calls for universities to ensure appropriate provisions are in place.

As well as these challenges, seeking support and disclosing mental health issues has been shown to be an issue for many students. A poll of over 1,000 students by the National Union of Students (NUS) found that, although eight out of 10 had experienced mental health issues over a year, less than half had sought support.<sup>4</sup>

Caroline Hounsell, Director and Higher Education lead, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England, commented, "We are committed to playing a part in improving the mental health support given to young people at all levels within the education sector. In launching this new Higher Education MHFA course we hope to address some of the concerns around mental health provision in universities by ensuring that more students and staff have access to those trained in MHFA skills. Although students fall into a particularly at-risk group, early intervention and



support can reduce many long-term impacts of mental ill health including academic failure, dropout and limited employment prospects.”

“A focus on supporting the mental wellbeing of the staff who support students is also key to building mentally healthy higher education communities. There is increasing demand on lecturers, tutors, administrative staff, facilities staff and dedicated support staff to provide care to students, often with limited resources. By giving these staff the skills and confidence to spot the signs and symptoms of common mental health issues and provide help on a first aid basis, I believe we can not only ensure students are better supported, but also that peer-to-peer mental health support among under pressure staff is improved.”

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association recently found that mental ill health accounts for around 20% of days lost for university employees,<sup>5</sup> and around two thirds of academics with mental health issues associate these directly with the impact their work has on their wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> Burnout and stress are common from PhD students to vice-chancellors and issues such as isolation, lack of support, long hours, a normalised culture of overwork and conflicting pressures from university league tables and student satisfaction surveys can all have a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing.<sup>6,7</sup>

Rosie Tressler, CEO, Student Minds, commented, “Last week saw the launch of two research reports and the new strategic framework 'StepChange', which encourages universities to take a whole-institution approach to university mental health and wellbeing. Training will undoubtedly play an important part in supporting institutions to achieve this aim, helping all members of the community to build their own knowledge and skills in order to look after their own mental health, support others and tackle stigma.”

“Whilst different staff require different levels of training, it's great to see initiatives like the Higher Education MHFA course providing the community with a foundation to understanding mental health and pathways to care. Hopefully with more initiatives and collaboration across sectors like this, more students and staff who are experiencing mental health difficulties will be encouraged to access the support that's right for them at a timely point, be it from their GP, university support services or peer support groups.”

To find out more about MHFA England and Higher Education MHFA courses visit: [mhfaengland.org/individuals/higher-education](https://mhfaengland.org/individuals/higher-education).

-ENDS-

## Notes to editors

### About the Higher Education MHFA One Day course

The Higher Education MHFA One Day course is designed for anyone who works or studies in a university environment and enables participants to gain the skills and confidence to spot the signs of mental health issues, offer first aid and guide someone towards the support they may need. The course itself includes a mix of presentations, group discussions and workshop activities and all delegates receive a copy of the Higher Education MHFA manual, which is an excellent support resource, as well a certificate to say they are a Higher Education MFHA Champion.

### About MHFA England

1. MHFA England is a Community Interest Company, established in 2009.
2. MHFA is the mental health equivalent of physical first aid training and provides participants with the skills and confidence to recognise the signs and symptoms of common mental health issues and effectively guide a person towards the right support services.
3. To date over 200,000 people in England are Mental Health First Aid trained.
4. The core principles of MHFA include: spotting the signs of a mental health issue, helping to prevent issues from getting worse and give confidence in helping someone who is experiencing a problem.
5. As well as the Higher Education MHFA course, the organisation runs a number of bespoke courses including Adult MHFA, Youth MHFA, Armed Forces MHFA and Workplace MHFA.
6. MHFA has a proven international track record and has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness through evaluation – details can be found at [mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation](http://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation).
7. More information about MHFA England and its courses can be found at [www.mhfaengland.org](http://www.mhfaengland.org) or by emailing [info@mhfaengland.org](mailto:info@mhfaengland.org).

### References

1. Cregan, K. et al. 2016. HE Mental Health First Aid training course. Submitted for publication. (Summary available at [healthyuniversities.ac.uk](http://healthyuniversities.ac.uk)).
2. Mental Health Foundation, 2015. Fundamental Facts about Mental Health.
3. Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2015.
4. National Union of Students, 2015: All Party Parliamentary Group on Students briefing
5. Universities & Colleges Employers Association, 2015: Sick Leave Survey
6. Guardian survey of 2,561 academics, 2014.



7. University and College Union, 2013. Higher stress: A survey of stress and well-being among staff in higher education.