



# Being a Youth MHFAider

Your guide to the role



MHFA England

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# Welcome

We all have mental health and, just like our physical health, it needs looking after. This also applies to children and young people. Half of all reported poor mental health is established by the age of 14 years old and more than 200 school-aged young people are lost to suicide every year. Poor mental health that presents during childhood and adolescence can have lifelong effects that impact upon a range of adult outcomes. These include employment, the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships, and general health and wellbeing.

Due to the lack of Government funding to the NHS, professional mental health help is not always available straight away. Investment in community youth services, such as youth clubs and groups, have also fallen across the country. Despite this the needs of young people have increased. When these sources of help are not available, those who have attended a Youth Mental Health First Aid course have the skills and knowledge to provide person-centred, first-response support. They can help by assessing for any crises and safeguarding concerns, helping young people to feel valued and listened to, and providing crucial signposting information. That is why it is so important that you have taken this step.

Having taken the course, you are becoming part of an ever-growing community of over 700,000 people in England and seven million people worldwide who have been trained in MHFA®, are passionate about building mental health literacy, challenging stigma, promoting positive mental health, and making sure everyone gets the support they need. It is this community that will achieve our vision of a society where all children and young people are emotionally nurtured, have the opportunity to understand their mental health, and feel confident asking for help. You will shortly be invited join the Association of Mental Health First Aiders®, the first and only membership body for mental health first aiders, free of charge. As part of the Association, you will be encouraged to attend our Youth MHFA Refresher course, a vital part of maintaining up-to-date skills and knowledge.

Together, we will make a positive change. But to do so, we must also look after ourselves. As Audre Lorde, the civil rights activist and poet said, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation”. So please take the time and energy to look after yourself. If we aren't well, we're not able to safely offer support to others. From me and the MHFA England® team, we wish you all the best in using the skills and knowledge you have learned on this Youth MHFA course, brought to you by MHFA England. Please do share any feedback at [feedback@mhfaengland.org](mailto:feedback@mhfaengland.org).



*S McIntosh*

**Sarah McIntosh**  
Chief Executive,  
MHFA England



# Your responsibilities

**“Youth MHFA support could feel like a shelter from outside worries. The Youth MHFAider should provide lots of possible directions that a young person can make their own decisions about.”**

*Emily, 15 years old*

Youth MHFAiders® can have a profound and positive impact in their workplace and communities. Carrying out your role responsibly involves the following:



## **Uphold the values and qualities of the role**

- Approachable
- Non-judgemental
- Emotionally aware
- Accepting
- Genuine
- Empathetic
- Attentive
- A skilled listener
- A skilled communicator
- Trustworthy
- Patient
- Resourceful
- Realistic



## Your responsibilities cont.



### **Contribute to reducing stigma and promote positive mental health**

Use active listening skills throughout your support, taking into consideration your own Frame of Reference and the language you are using around mental health. Improve your knowledge about the mental health landscape for young people in England. Continue to think about what you learnt on the course and how it applies to the real-life contexts you are in.



### **Follow the Youth MHFA action plan**

Use the Youth MHFA action plan to guide your support and use good judgement about the order and the relevance of these actions. Be flexible and responsive. The Youth MHFA action plan is in accordance with international MHFA Guidelines, which have been developed by researchers in Australia since 2005 and has been adapted for an English audience. The international guidelines were developed using the consensus of expert panels with lived experience, carers, and professionals from several English-speaking countries.



### **Practise self-care**

Understand the importance of practising self-care and wellbeing regularly to manage the stress in your Stress Container.



### **Maintain boundaries in the Youth MHFAider role**

It's important to remember that MHFA England courses do not teach people to be therapists or counsellors, or how to diagnose mental health conditions, nor do they encourage Youth MHFAiders to provide ongoing support. Understanding and maintaining appropriate boundaries is a key part of successfully providing Youth MHFA.

# Boundaries in the role

**“Learning to be a Youth MHFAider is like becoming a kangaroo – creating a warm and safe space and carrying around different sets of skills and resources in their pocket.”**

*Jessica, Youth MHFA Instructor Member*

The Youth MHFAider role is a first-response role. Much like in physical first aid, it is then the job of an appropriate professional to provide clinical support to the young person.

Clearly communicated boundaries between the Youth MHFAider and the young person are crucial. Not maintaining boundaries risks a significant impact on the wellbeing of both the Youth MHFAider and the young person being supported.

If you are also fulfilling another role at the same time, such as school staff, ensure that you understand how your other role may extend past the boundaries of being a Youth MHFAider.

The Youth MHFAider role should not be treated as distinct to any other role you fulfil but add additional layers of skill and knowledge to your approach when supporting young people. Your Youth MHFA skills can be applied at any time, regardless of whether you are working in another capacity.



## Confidentiality

When discussing support you've given to a young person with other people (such as other Youth MHFAiders or education professionals) it is vital to respect the young person's right to privacy. Identifiable details such as name, age, gender, and appearance should be left out of conversations. Identifying someone risks stigma and unfair treatment in the education setting or community.

It is important for every Youth MHFAider to know and follow the safeguarding and data-sharing policies and procedures in their setting. You may need to signpost a young person who cannot access support by themselves to another contact in the school (such as a mental health lead or pastoral team member). You may also need to find others

to assist a young person at risk of harming themselves or others.

When entering reflective notes into the MHFAider Support App®, all data is encrypted and stored securely. This includes names, initials, and unique identifiers.

In some situations, a young person may refuse to speak to a Youth MHFAider unless they promise total confidentiality. Youth MHFAiders should not promise to keep threats to a person's safety a secret. Communicate to the young person that you are there to support them but can only do so if they let you know what's happening, and that a part of supporting them is to ensure that they remain safe.

## Boundaries in the role cont.



### Dependency

Waiting lists for youth mental health services can be long, but it isn't appropriate for the Youth MHFAider to hold the relationship with the young person for a long time. You shouldn't keep a long-term relationship or maintain frequent contact with the young person whilst they wait for professional help.

Additionally, some young people can't access professional help by themselves, for example if they are a pre-adolescent.

If appropriate, the Youth MHFAider should contact a trusted adult for continued support. This might be a parent/carer in a community setting or a professional contact in an education or workplace setting.

After you have signposted to a professional, it might feel appropriate to follow up with the young person to see how they are doing and whether they are feeling hopeful. Just like with physical first aid, it can feel important to check in on the person you have supported to show compassion.

This sort of contact is appropriate so long as it does not develop into a new relationship with the young person. It also lets them know that you are available and can be trusted on any future occurrences to listen again to any problems they're having. If there is a pre-existing relationship between the Youth MHFAider and the young person, then this can be disregarded.

To reduce the risk of both emotional and practical dependency, the Youth MHFAider should communicate where the role begins and ends. The aim of this is to try to empower the young person to make decisions about their wellbeing.

In instances where the young person shows signs of being dependent on your support, you should communicate the boundaries of the role again and help them to access appropriate professional help with a trusted adult.



### Inappropriate relationships

The Youth MHFAider role is a position of trust. Pursuing a personal or sexual relationship with the young person breaks that trust.

It's against the law for someone in any official position of trust to engage in sexual activity with a child in their care, even if that child is over the age of consent (16 years old or over). Regardless of the Youth MHFAider role not being a position of trust recognised by the Government, pursuing a relationship with a young person of any age is outside of the role's boundaries and is completely unacceptable on moral grounds.

Even in a close emotional relationship, it isn't always possible to see a situation objectively and you risk being judgemental.

A young person seeking support may be vulnerable, which could compromise their mental health.



### Your wellbeing

Consider and communicate your availability and time commitments to the role. You should consider this in relation to other work or community responsibilities, as well as your own wellbeing.

Recognising when you are struggling is key. When you are experiencing poor mental health yourself, or when you are having a tough day, you will bring these emotions to the role with you and will find it harder to be empathic. This puts the person being supported at risk.

You also put your own wellbeing at risk by adding to your Stress Container. If you can't support the young person in that moment, make sure there is another trusted adult available. Ask a Youth MHFAider for support, or an educational professional (such as a mental health lead or pastoral team member) if you are in an education setting.

# Self-care

**“The Youth MHFAider shouldn’t try to juggle multiple supports at once so they provide the best support. They should try to understand the fine line between fulfilling the support role and offering too much help and becoming overinvolved.”**

*Zara, 15 years old*

Understand the importance of self-care and of practising it regularly to manage the stress in your Stress Container.

Before an aeroplane takes off, flight attendants talk passengers through the oxygen mask procedure. The procedure instructs passengers on a flight to ensure that they put on their own mask before helping others, because we can’t assist others if we lose consciousness. The same principle applies to the Youth MHFAider role: if we aren’t well, we’re not able to safely offer support to others.

After supporting a young person who is in emotional distress you may feel worn out, upset, frustrated, or even angry.

Self-care is the practice of engaging in activities that take care of your health and actively manage poor mental health when it occurs.

Cortisol is a naturally occurring hormone that helps to manage the body’s stress response, but too much can be bad for our health.

Managing stress levels by practising self-care can reduce cortisol levels in the body. The Stress Container model demonstrates this. When we practise self-care we can help to stop our container overflowing. Think of this as releasing our stressors via the container’s ‘tap’.

With the rise of self-care culture there is an increasing pressure on individuals to fully manage their own mental health, with many solutions having an emphasis on physical beauty or making a financial investment or purchase. The aim of practising self-care should be to carry out activities that make us feel better, and to avoid overextending ourselves. Try to be realistic and think about whether you can meet the time, financial, or energy requirements of a self-care activity before starting it.

Self-care differs from person to person and your self-care activities can change over time. Some things we might do daily, like going for a walk, and others we might do once a year, like enjoying a great holiday.

You may also need to deal with the feelings and reactions you set aside during the Youth MHFA conversation. Youth MHFAiders can also access Shout’s mental health text support service via the MHFAider Support App. It can also be helpful to make reflective notes on your experience in the MHFAider Support App, or you could find someone to talk to about your experience. Please do remember that the purpose of the reflective notes in the Support App is to reflect on the Youth MHFA conversation you had and how you feel about it. You shouldn’t use it to make a direct record of the conversation, but instead use it as a tool for reflection and growth in the role.

Remember to leave out identifying details if you speak to somebody else about your experience.



# The Association of Mental Health First Aiders

Once you've trained as a Youth MHFAider with MHFA England, you are certified for three years.

You'll also be invited to become a member of the Association of Mental Health First Aiders, making sure you have everything you need to feel confident when supporting others.

You'll have exclusive access to a range of resources, from training to events and research. These resources are designed to support you in your role but also to empower you to raise awareness and combat mental health stigma.

This includes:

## The MHFAider Support App.

- Access to features such as a 24/7 text support service, signposting to a national database of health services, and insights that teach critical self-care skills

## Access to the MHFA England Online Learning Hub.

- This includes resources such as course manuals and MHFAider guides

## First-hand insights.

- Learn from real people sharing their honest and lived experiences of mental health conditions

## Online networking.

- We'll invite you to exclusive quarterly webinars to help you carry out your role with confidence, skill, and care

## Monthly newsletters.

- You'll be kept up to date with all the latest news from our community

## Youth MHFA Refresher course

As a Youth MHFAider and member of the Association of Mental Health First Aiders you are encouraged to take a Youth MHFA Refresher course once every three years.

By taking the Youth MHFA Refresher course you will retain your membership and regularly refresh your knowledge. During the course, you will have time to practise skills with others and become empowered to perform the role confidently and safely.

If it has been three years since you completed your Youth MHFA training, then speak to your employer or sign up to attend the Youth MHFA Refresher course today.



**Association**  
of Mental Health First Aiders

# Share your story

Your story has the potential to inspire and help others. By sharing experiences of mental health and supporting others, we can help tackle stigma, creating a community that speaks freely about mental health and in which people seek support when they need it.

If you feel comfortable sharing your experience of being an MHFAider, or know someone who would be willing to share their story, we would love to hear from you.

Please email us at [stories@mhfaengland.org](mailto:stories@mhfaengland.org).

## Get in touch with MHFA England

You may find it helpful to keep up to date with the latest mental health news and campaigns. Find out how to keep in touch with us below.

Follow us on social media [@MHFAEngland](https://twitter.com/MHFAEngland)

Sign up to our [newsletter](#)

Explore our website [mhfaengland.org](https://mhfaengland.org)

Visit our [community blog](#)





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