

# Mental Health First Aid: equipping the nurses of the future

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Mental Health First Aid: equipping our nurses of the future

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## Abstract

The current provision of mental health content within Pre-registration Nursing for those not undertaking this field of practice is variable; it does not guarantee that each student nurse will receive the guidance on how to support those with mental health needs. Coventry University is addressing this shortfall by ensuring that those not undertaking mental health nursing are given the opportunity of undertaking a MHFA Lite course in their second year of training. The evaluations indicate that many students lacked both knowledge and confidence and that participation has resulted in them feeling more able to sign post and support those with mental health needs.

## Key phrases and key words

Mental Health First Aid, mental health, student nurse education, emotional resilience,

There was an interesting piece from Fionuala Bonnar in the comment area of the BJN in issue 14 suggesting that Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) should feature in “basic nurse training” (Bonnar, 2015: 4). Nurse education has changed from a time when general pre-registration nurse training incorporated a psychiatric experience as the General Nursing Council (GNC) required (Barrett & Jackson, 2013). From 1988 a specific psychiatric placement experience for general nurses was no longer stipulated as there was a shift in focus to learning about mental health via the integration of it throughout the curriculum (Rentoul, 1991). However, specific mental health placements were often still an element in subsequent nursing courses including Project 2000 where all branches of nursing were exposed to mental health experiences in the common foundation programme (UKCC, 2001). In current nursing degree courses this can vary from university to university and some may not give specific mental health placement experiences at all to non-mental health nursing students. The requirements of the European Directives 77/453/EEC and 89/595/EEC stipulate that some mental health education is given in all pre-registration adult nursing courses and can be included in the other fields of nursing though it does not give instruction on *how* this must be met. The NMC Standards for Pre-registration Education (2010, 1.1) also requires that

“Nurses must be able to recognise and respond to the needs of all people who come into their care.... including people with mental health problems”.

Without a prescriptive content to adhere to one wonders if this enough and if what is being taught is useful in a practical way as Bonnar (2015) suggested.

At Coventry University we have begun to address this by employing the use of the MHFA Lite programme and made it mandatory for our student nurses (except Mental Health Nursing Students) to attend. This is a 3 hour introductory course addressing language and stigma, exploring what mental health is and some common mental health problems. The course then gives participants tools to support people in distress and to be mindful of their own emotional resilience considering their coping strategies for emotional wellbeing (MHFA England, 2013). Zilnyk (2010) also supports that participants on such MHFA courses are known to have increasing awareness in recognising and improving their own wellbeing and coping strategies. We recognise as a profession that the reality of practice indicates ever increasing levels of stress (RCN, 2015). Therefore, our intention is two-fold to increase awareness of common mental health problems in our student population for the patients/clients that they will support. At the same time improve the mental wellbeing of the students themselves. In the context of Higher Education environments where nursing students generally spend half of their course, it is recognised that 20% of university students reporting mental health problems and 13% reporting having suicidal thoughts (NUS, 2013) this is a useful additional benefit. The increased awareness of emotional resilience and mental health may help reduce stress related sickness and burn out as highlighted by Peate (2015)

For the implementation of MHFA Lite into our curricula we have two Senior Lecturers in Adult Nursing, one Senior Lecturer in Children and Young People’s Nursing who are approved instructors to deliver the course to our student nurses. As part of newly developed Mental Health First Aid Strategy within our Faculty of Health and Life Sciences we are involving colleagues from other health care disciplines and hope to expand provision across other allied health disciplines.

At present the Lite course is being delivered in the second year for Adult Nursing, Learning Disability Nursing and Children and Young People’s Nursing. It is a three hour session and our first two cohorts of 178 nursing students have completed it. The evaluation completed following attendance included a Likert scale to self-report

participants pre- and post- course confidence levels (0 being no confidence in how to support people with a mental health problem and 10 full confidence). The results (n=178) indicated low self-evaluation prior to the course mode (commonest response) 4 & 5 (n=86 students) indicating that student nurses lacked confidence. Following the course self-evaluation showed a marked improvement in confidence; mode (commonest response) response 7 & 8 on the Likert Scale (n=123) and 25 indicated a 9. More striking were the qualitative comments on what they had learnt. Some are shared here:

“how common mental health problems are”

“everyone experiences a mental health problem differently”

“be careful of language used, don’t stigmatise...”

“greater understanding”

“learnt importance of just listening to someone in emotional distress”

“not to be worried about discussing self-harm and suicide”

“strategies to improve own resilience”

Whilst the team recognises these are a small number of evaluations at the beginning of this new initiative; this is providing a positive indication that the course appears beneficial in increasing awareness, knowledge and skills in supporting people in emotional distress by signposting to both professional and self-help. These are significant issues in supporting people in distress and helping to reduce the stigma of mental health problems. This is clearly a priority when it is estimated that in people under 65, nearly half of all ill health is due to mental illness (London School of Economics (2012) therefore it follows that as nurses we will encounter many patients, relatives and carers with unrecognised and undiagnosed depression and anxiety as well as patients with diagnosed mental health problems.

As Bonnar (2015) pointed out academic knowledge about mental illness does not necessarily mean that the skills to support people in their mental health are also acquired. Whilst nurses will have gained some knowledge and have some ability to recognise signs and symptoms and refer to appropriate professionals from their

nurse education, those with Mental Health First Aid training would have the tools to be able to address their needs from a first aid perspective. This can only serve to improve the mental wellbeing of the patients/clients they nurse.

With the Shape of Caring Review (2015:42) recognising the need to develop our health care professions to provide “whole person care” and recognising that adult nursing curriculum may not address enough mental health content, we believe the introduction of MHFA Lite into our current curricula is a step towards encouraging our students to develop a more person centred approach.

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