



Dear MHFA Instructors and Friends,

Here is our first MHFA Newsletter for 2006. It contains a variety of news including further MHFA Program developments, partnerships forged by MHFA Instructors, stories from Instructors and relevant new research. Please keep sending in your stories and items for inclusion in the next MHFA Newsletters

At the end of last year, the MHFA Program moved to the main ORYGEN Mental Health site which is still located in Parkville Victoria. We are now very close to the Commonwealth Village and also to the Melbourne zoo. Our postal address, mobile phone numbers and email addresses have not changed only our phone and fax numbers and residential address.

**NEW FAX NUMBER:**        03 9342 3745

New phone numbers:        Leanne Northausen: 03 9342 3770  
   Betty Kitchener:    03 9342 3771  
   Len Kanowski:       03 9342 3767

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**REVISED DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID**

In the process of developing National MHFA standards, the MHFA team has refined our definition of what mental health first aid is. The old definition was: "Mental Health First Aid is the initial help given to someone experiencing a mental health problem before professional help is sought".

The revised definition is:

*"Mental Health First Aid is the help provided to a person developing a mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis resolves".*

**NEW RESOURCES FOR YOUR MHFA COURSES** (access these on your Resources webpage)

**a) More Scenarios**

- Thanks to Susan Goldie (MHFA Instructor in Sydney) for contributing 2 more excellent workplace scenarios – one for acute stress reaction and the other for substance use disorder in the workplace.
- Thanks to Prof Brian Kelly from the Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health in Orange, NSW for some rural scenarios
- Thanks to Len Kanowski and some family court staff for some scenarios relevant to family court situations.

**b) New title slide for the MHFA slide presentation.**

Updated your PPT CD – the ANU logo has been removed from the title slide. Please download and replace Slide 1.

**ACCREDITATION OF MHFA INSTRUCTORS**

- There are now over 450 accredited MHFA Instructors in Australia. However, not all are active. We would like to update our MHFA web listing of active Instructors. All MHFA Instructors need to teach at least 3 MHFA courses per year to remain accredited. If not already done, it is time to complete and email a Post Course Details Form for each MHFA course conducted in 2005. This form is available towards the end of your resources webpage. Thank you to the many Instructors who have already done this.
- Also, all MHFA Instructors (old & new) need to sign a new acknowledgement form. It is now an additional condition of maintaining accreditation that all existing MHFA Instructors sign this. It can be found on the Instructor Information webpage: <http://www.mhfa.com.au/training.htm>

**NEWS FROM MHFA INSTRUCTORS**

- The MHFA Instructors in Barwon Health in Geelong, VIC have been successful in their application to receive **RNCA endorsement** for their delivery of the 12 hour MHFA course to nurses.
- Perth MHFA Instructor Tasha Broomhall works for Green Apple Development which has formed a unique partnership with the **Australian Red Cross** (WA), through which MHFA training will be provided to the public in the Perth metropolitan area. As part of Workpower Incorporated, Green Apple Development shares the Australian Red Cross's values and humanitarian focus, operating to create employment opportunities for people living with disabilities. There are 24 courses scheduled for the 2006 calendar and these courses are open to the general public as well as businesses.
- Sydney MHFA Instructor Susan Goldie is the Chairperson for Mental Illness Education Australia (NSW) Board (MIEA NSW) which has a partnership with the **NSW Mental Health Council** to deliver MHFA courses to MHCC members.

**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS BY MHFA INSTRUCTORS ABOUT THE MHFA PROGRAM**

- Lorette Langford (Tassie Instructor) presented at the Suicide & Self Harm Conference in Brisbane in March 2006.

- Rachel Louttit (Sydney Instructor) presented at the National Homelessness Conference in Sydney in March 2006
- Over 7 MHFA Instructor have put in abstracts for the TheMHS Conference in Townsville Sept 2006

### **MHFA WEBSITE**

- **Hits for 2005** There were 48,000 unique visitors accessing the MHFA website between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2005
- **MHFA class photos** Do you a photo of your classes? We can now put them up on the website if you wish on the "Past Courses" webpage:  
[http://www.mhfa.com.au/past\\_courses.htm](http://www.mhfa.com.au/past_courses.htm) If you are interested, please email your photo(s) to Leanne Northausen, along with the date & venue, thanks. Email: [leannen@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:leannen@unimelb.edu.au)

### **RELEVANT NEW RESEARCH**

- **Gene for Depression in the News**

Recently there have been some newspaper articles claiming that a gene has been found for depression. The gene in question is the serotonin transporter gene, which comes in two versions called "long" and "short". This gene is of great interest because SSRI antidepressants alter the transport of serotonin, so a gene that affects serotonin transport might have an influence on risk of depression. The short version of the serotonin transporter gene has been under intense investigation as a risk factor since 1996. While a number of studies have found it to be associated with depression, many others have not. In a recent review, it was concluded that any association is small. However, the more recent work has taken a slightly different approach and claimed that the short version of the gene is associated with depression only in people who have experienced a lot of childhood adversity. There have been fewer studies on this, but again the evidence is mixed. While a number of positive findings have been published, including a recent study from Sydney, other researchers have failed to replicate the finding. Newspaper reports that the gene for depression has been found are greatly exaggerated. In general, there have been many announcements of genes associated with mental disorders that have not stood up to replication. In view of this, it is best to maintain a skeptical view. There is obviously a genetic component, but it is not proving easy to pin down.

Reference:

Levinson DF (2005) The Genetics of Depression: A Review. *Biological Psychiatry*, in press.

- **Can asking about suicide cause harm?**

The MHFA course advises first aiders to ask someone directly if they suspect the person is having suicidal thoughts. However, sometimes course participants question the wisdom of this advice. They fear that asking about suicide might "put the idea in someone's head". Is there any basis to this fear? Recently, a US study looked at the impact of giving a questionnaire about suicide to a large number of high school students (2342 students in 6 high schools in New York State in 2002-2004). On a random basis, half the students received the suicide questionnaire and the other half did not. Then, two days later, all students received the suicide questionnaire. The researchers wanted to find out whether those who received the first questionnaire reported more suicidal thoughts and more distress in the second questionnaire. The result was that the researchers found no increase in distress or suicidal thoughts in the students as a whole. Then they looked specifically at the sub-group of students who were

depressed and at those who had previous suicide attempts. Again, they found no evidence of harm. In fact, there was some benefit to these students as they had lower scores on the second questionnaire on distressed symptoms ( $P = .01$ ) and suicidal thoughts ( $P = .02$ ) than controls. So, the conclusion is that asking about suicide does not cause harm and might actually be beneficial.

Reference: Gould MS et al. Evaluating iatrogenic risk of youth suicide screening programs: a randomized controlled trial. *JAMA*; 2005: 1635-1643.

- **Good review article on Schizophrenia**

Austin J (2005) Schizophrenia: an update and review. *Genetic Counseling* 14 (5) 329 -340.

## **INTERNATIONAL MHFA NEWS**

- **Scottish MHFA**

Alana Atkinson, Co-coordinator of the SMHFA Training Team writes:

It has been an exciting and busy time for us in Scotland. We are just about to run our fourth training for Instructors in March 2006 and the next ones are being planned for June and October. By the end of March we will have 138 Instructors delivering courses across Scotland from Shetland in the north, Benbecula in the west, Dumfries in the south and Aberdeen in the east. In our first year we have delivered 164 courses to 1825 satisfied participants. We are planning our first National Network event in June, when we hope to bring as many of the Instructors together and even have some audio/visual input from Betty. We are delighted to be supporting the introduction of SMHFA to **Ireland** in 2006. There are 15 Instructors currently delivering courses to people in both the **Republic and Northern Ireland** in a significant cross border initiative. At this stage they are delivering to people who work with and support people aged 16 to 25. If it is well received and the evaluation is positive, they hope to develop the course for a wider rollout across Ireland.

Discussions are underway to do a similar pilot in **Wales** over the coming year. This will involve having the Manual and all materials translated into Welsh to ensure the course is accessible to everyone. Finally, different regions of England are keen to introduce the course and are trying to find the resources to do this.

So, when are we holding the first International event for Instructors and where will it be held? Bondi Beach, perhaps?

Jennie Thomas, the generous lady who donated \$20,000 to the MHFA program to fund the design and production of the MHFA manual, emailed Betty this story:

“There's no doubt about how well your work has gone and how far it is going and will go. Did I tell you I met people from Scotland while I was in Antarctica who had heard of the Scottish MHFA Program. So I filled them in a bit and they have gone back as advocates too”.

- **MHFA Hong Kong**

Michael Wong from the Mental Health Association of Hong Kong writes.

The MHFA program is moving ahead steadily since last September. Three out of the four new instructors have started running the course and doing well. We are just doing the final touch on the Chinese version of the manual and it is going to the printers within weeks. We scheduled 2 refresher courses for those who went through the course in the past. The first one is already full with 40 people signed up, out of those 40 about 10 indicated that they have applied skills acquired in the MHFA after their ‘graduations’. We will try to see if we can come up with a collection of circumstances where MHFA was used to assist someone with mental health problems.

Susana Yim, MHFA Instructor from the Kwai Hospital in Hong Kong writes:  
In the past 2 years, Kwai Chung Hospital has organised 2 MHFA classes per year. The program is very encouraging. We are now exploring the funding for the long run of the program.

- **MHFA Program to Singapore**

Hard work by Jeannie Koh from the Office of Safety, Health and Environment at the National University of Singapore has resulted in a grant to train 10 MHFA Instructors in Singapore in June this year. Len Kanowski will be the Trainer of Instructors taking the MHFA Program to Singapore

- **MHFA Program to Canada**

Deb Gray from the Calgary Health Region and Beth Evans from the Alberta Mental Health Board in the Canadian province of Alberta have secured funding to bring over the MHFA Program. Betty Kitchener will be the Trainer of Instructors travelling to Edmonton and Calgary to conduct two MHFA Instructor Training Courses for Canada in the last 2 weeks of March.

- **MHFA manual in Finland**

Prof Kristian Wahlbeck from the National Research & Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) (<http://www.stakes.fi/english/>) has been involved in bringing the MHFA Program to Finland. The Finnish Association for Mental Health (<http://www.mielenterveysseura.fi/english.asp?main=English>) has adapted the MHFA manual for Finnish circumstances and translated it into Finnish, with plans to do a Swedish translation later this year. An additional chapter on positive mental health and promotion of mental health has been included. In mid 2006, in collaboration with Mikko Häikiö from the regional Vaasa Hospital District ([www.vshp.fi](http://www.vshp.fi)), Alana Atkinson (SMHFA) and Betty Kitchener (MHFA Australia) will travel to the region of NW Finland to help with the training of the first group of Finnish MHFA Instructors.

### **ATSI MHFA MANUAL / PROGRAM UPDATE**

The MHFA Team has been busily seeking funding to advance the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid Program. Step 1 of the Program involved the adaptation of the standard MHFA Manual to make it more culturally appropriate. Once the adapted Manual is endorsed by the Commonwealth Indigenous Strategies Working Group (ISWG) we will be in a position to release the manual and post it on the MHFA website. We plan to conduct the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Instructor Training Course 23 - 27 October 2006 in NSW. The course will be especially designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Instructors. Our plan is to eventually have at least 30 accredited Aboriginal instructors across Australia. If you have any questions or comments about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander MHFA Program please contact Len Kanowski on telephone 03 9342 3767 or via email at [Len.Kanowski@mh.org.au](mailto:Len.Kanowski@mh.org.au)

### **INSTRUCTORS' STORIES**

- This one is from Mick Burge, experienced MHFA Instructor in Toowoomba, QLD:  
"I certainly have a few heart wrenching moments to share from my experience of teaching MHFA courses - for example a lady in Townsville who asked me outside in a break on the second day of the course and started crying and gave me a huge cuddle. She said "Thank you - for years I have thought it was just me and I wasn't aware I could get any help for my

problem". She lives in Townsville and couldn't go outside the house without freaking out and therefore has been like a hermit in her own home for approx 15 years. I received an email from her about 5 weeks after the course and she said she had visited her sister for the first time in 10 years (she lives in Ingham) and said she couldn't thank me enough for changing her life".

- Here is an account from Amy Dempsey, MHFA Instructor in Lismore, NSW after conducting her first course:

"I ran my first MHFA course last week! It went fantastically well (despite thinking I was going to vomit with fear on the morning as I drove to work!)and I have received lots of excellent feedback. The course participants were my co-workers, some of who used to be clients of the program I work for (Disability Employment Service for people with mental health issues) and other staff in different departments who had little knowledge of mental health issues/ literacy. It was lots of fun and my boss wants me to deliver it to all of our office sites. The reception staff found it especially useful for helping clients who may appear angry, defensive or delusional when coming in to see their case manager. The reception and admin staff said they feel more confident in dealing with and helping unwell clients now that they understand a little of what's actually going on for them".

- Here is another first time account, this one from Kate Rickerby in Geraldton:  
"Interesting first time. It was a good group and the venue was good, once we all were able to find our way there! The group was very responsive and interested. I felt that though there were some hiccups such as the room not being open on first arrival, the projector cutting out in the middle of session 3 and the OHP had gone missing, it didn't work out too badly. I feel much more comfortable about it now I have completed this one without the earth opening up and swallowing me!"

- This account is from Tasha Broomhall, experienced MHFA Instructor in Perth, WA:  
"It was interesting because everything that could possibly go wrong with the technology did; the venue was terrible (they were painting the hall that our room came off and we had no ventilation and so were consumed by paint fumes for most of the two days); and it was set up in classroom style seating and I found it hard to therefore see and remember participants names!!

However there were some great discussions had and the content was really well received and enthusiastically embraced by all participants (and it was good to get a test of my contingency plans as everything was called into play for this course!). The feedback was the best I've ever received (almost all fives which is the top score on our feedback sheet) and lots of recommendations gained for whom else the course would be good for".

### **EXCELLENT NEW ONLINE DEPRESSION GAME FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

Reach Out (<http://www.reachout.com.au>) was created by the Inspire Foundation to help combat youth suicide and provide young people with support. It his developing a new web-based role-playing game to help young Australians beat the blues. Called Reach Out! Central, the game lets players select how they feel and how they deal with various pressures, using scenarios many young people can relate to from family conflict to drug and alcohol issues. Organisers hope their online efforts will reach those who would otherwise not seek help.