



HELPING SOMEONE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES: GUIDELINES FOR THE SUPPORT PERSON

These guidelines are about how a support person can assist someone who is experiencing mental health problems and financial difficulties. A **support person** is someone who is a significant source of emotional or practical support or assistance. A support person may be a partner, close friend or family member. However, it is not assumed that every person with mental health problems and financial difficulties has a support person.

If the person is not receiving professional mental health care, the following other guidelines on how to support a person with mental health problems should be used

(mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines):

- Depression: first aid guidelines
- Psychosis: first aid guidelines
- Panic attacks: first aid guidelines
- Eating disorders: first aid guidelines
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviours: first aid guidelines
- Non-suicidal self-injury: first aid guidelines
- Helping someone with alcohol use problems: mental health first aid guidelines
- Helping someone with drug use problems: mental health first aid guidelines
- Helping someone with problem cannabis use: mental health first aid guidelines

Definitions of mental illness and mental health problems

‘MENTAL ILLNESS’ is a diagnosable illness that affects a person’s thinking, emotional state and behaviour, and disrupts the person’s ability to work or carry out other daily activities and engage in satisfying personal relationships.

‘MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS’ is a broader term including mental illnesses, symptoms of mental illnesses that may not be severe enough to warrant the diagnosis of a mental illness, as well as mental health-related crises such as having thoughts of suicide.

All MHFA guidelines can be downloaded from mhfa.com.au



HELPING SOMEONE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES: GUIDELINES FOR THE SUPPORT PERSON

The links between mental health problems and financial difficulties

Mental health problems can contribute to financial difficulties, and vice versa, e.g. failing to pay bills because of depression or experiencing suicidal thoughts due to financial difficulties.

The impact of mental health on financial difficulties

Symptoms of mental health problems may impact on financial difficulties. For example, a person with mental health problems may not complete financial tasks because they forget, lack the motivation to pay bills, make poor financial decisions, or feel overwhelmed by financial tasks, such as communicating with creditors, opening mail, or visiting Centrelink. The symptoms of mental illness may also be a sign of relapse of the person's mental health problems, e.g. overspending. Be familiar with the behaviours that may indicate the person is becoming unwell. There are also some specific sources of financial difficulties faced by people with mental health problems (see box).

Specific sources of financial difficulties for people with mental health problems may include:

- Debt incurred to support a drug or alcohol problem
- Increased medical expenses
- Gambling problems
- Overspending when in a manic or depressed state
- Job instability associated with episodic mental illness
- Poor money management due to paranoid thoughts, e.g. withdrawing money from the bank to keep it 'safe'.

The impact of financial difficulties on mental health

Financial difficulties can have a negative impact on mental health and addressing financial problems early can reduce this impact. However financial stability may not be an immediate goal for some people in the early stages of recovery from mental illness. Even a person who is making their repayments may still be experiencing financial difficulties and distress. It is also important to know that the way the person perceives their financial situation is what impacts on their mental health, rather than their actual situation.

Financial difficulties may also impact on mental health in a number of less obvious ways, including:

- Isolation and lack of support due to the inability to participate in social activities
- Worsening of mental health problems due to an inability to pay for treatment
- Stress caused by the processes that institutions use to recover debt.

Be aware that when a person sees no way back from their financial difficulties they might become suicidal or attempt suicide, therefore it is important that you know the warning signs and risk factors for suicide. You should ask about suicide if you think the person may be having thoughts of suicide and familiarise yourself with the *Suicidal thoughts and behaviours: first aid guidelines* (mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines).

Supporting the person

Financial counsellors and financial institutions can play an important role for people with mental health problems and financial difficulties, e.g. promoting financial inclusion (financial inclusion is having access to financial products and services that are suitable for the person). By asking direct questions about the person's financial situation, and whether they have any financial difficulties, you will be able to refer the person for appropriate advice, if necessary. Centrelink can provide benefits for people with mental health problems and you should encourage the person to use them.

You should be aware that most financial institutions have policies about assistance for people who are experiencing financial difficulties. You should also know what a financial administration order (see box overleaf) is and the implications for the person and their dealings with the financial institution.

Consider the following strategies for helping the person with mental health problems and financial difficulties:

- Discourage the person from ignoring their financial difficulties.
- Encourage the person to delay making large purchases until they have discussed them with you or another person.
- Work with the financial counsellor and mental health professional to determine what specific supports the person needs to enable them to make financial decisions.
- If memory or concentration problems are present, use simple and concise information about their financial situation and repeat this information, if necessary.



HELPING SOMEONE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES: GUIDELINES FOR THE SUPPORT PERSON

Financial Administration Orders

An Administration Order is a legal order to appoint an administrator to make financial decisions for a person with a mental incapacity. Administration orders differ in each state or territory. Please see the relevant website for more information:

QLD:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd_QLD

SA:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd_SA

TAS:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd1_TAS

VIC:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd_VIC

WA:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd1_WA

ACT:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd_ACT

NSW:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd1_NSW

NT:
bit.ly/FinAdminOrd_NT

Purpose of these Guidelines

These guidelines are designed to assist a support person to help someone with mental health problems and financial difficulties.

Development of these Guidelines

These guidelines are based on the expert opinions of panels of Australian financial counsellors, financial institution staff, mental health consumers and carers. Details of the methodology can be found in:

Bond, KS, Chalmers, KJ, Jorm, AF, Kitchener, BA, and Reavley, NJ. Helping someone with mental health problems and financial difficulties: a Delphi study to develop guidelines for financial counsellors, financial institution staff, mental health professionals and carers. BMC Health Services Research. 2015;15(218).

The development of these guidelines was funded by the National Australia Bank Ltd, Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Ltd, Westpac Banking Corporation, GE Capital Finance Australia Pty Ltd and *beyondblue* Ltd, with the support of the Australian Bankers' Association (ABA) and Financial Counselling Australia (FCA).

How to use these Guidelines

These guidelines are a general set of recommendations about how to help someone with mental health problems and financial difficulties. Each individual is unique and it is important to tailor your support to that person's needs. These recommendations therefore, may not be appropriate for every person with mental health problems and financial difficulties. Also, these guidelines are designed to be suitable for providing help in developed English-speaking countries. They may not be suitable for other cultural groups or for countries with different health systems.

These guidelines have been developed as part of a suite of guidelines about how to best assist a person with mental health problems. These other guidelines can be downloaded at: mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines.

Although these guidelines are copyright, they can be freely reproduced for non-profit purposes provided the source is acknowledged. Please cite the guidelines as follows:

Mental Health First Aid Australia. Helping someone with mental health problems and financial difficulties: guidelines for mental health professionals. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2015.

Enquiries should be sent to: Mental Health First Aid Australia
email: mhfa@mhfa.com.au

All MHFA guidelines can be downloaded from mhfa.com.au