



**MENTAL
HEALTH
FIRST AID**
Australia

These guidelines are designed to help members of the public to provide mental health first aid to someone who is experiencing distress related to the worldwide COVID-19 crisis and resulting isolation.

The role of a mental health first aider is to assist the person until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves.

A first aider cannot make a diagnosis of mental illness or provide therapy.

ASSISTING SOMEONE DISTRESSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our way of life for the foreseeable future in most parts of the world. While many have fallen ill, many more will experience symptoms of mental health problems, particularly anxiety.

People may be worried about many things, for example:

- Feared or actual loss or illness, of themselves or loved ones, including those they cannot be with
- Loss of employment, financial hardship, and food insecurity
- Access to healthcare
- Being isolated in an unsafe environment
- Witnessing distressing scenes in the media
- Supporting others who are directly affected
- Having to juggle childcare with working from home
- Distressed and anxious family members

- Compounded stress, as the bushfire season has left many people in a more vulnerable state.

Not everyone will react the same way. Even someone who is extremely distressed may adjust to the changes in a few days or weeks. Some people report feeling more resilient or experience a greater closeness within their community. Others go on to develop a mental health problem, e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or a substance use problem.

HOW CAN I HELP?

HOW CAN I SUPPORT SOMEONE I LIVE WITH?

Many people will be spending most of their time at home, with family members or in shared households.

- Encourage people to take time out and use relaxation methods and mindfulness to create some mental space
- Discuss good coping strategies and try to avoid alcohol use
- Try to remain calm and be patient
- Give accurate information if they want it and you have it. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know what to say or lack knowledge if this is the case
- Do not make promises you may not be able to keep, e.g. "Everything will be back to normal soon" or assure the person that everything will be fine.

It can be good to encourage the person to try something new or return to an old hobby, but don't be forceful about this. Productivity might make some people feel better, but others will be feeling overwhelmed and need to rest more than usual and that's fine too.

WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

Ask the person how they would like to be helped. Tell the person about services that are available to support them. Remember that many services are available online via teleconferencing or over the phone.

If the person wants to talk, be prepared to listen. If this is too distressing for you, find someone else for the person to talk to.

Behaviour such as withdrawal, irritability and bad temper may be a response to worries about the COVID-19 pandemic, the discomfort of social isolation or the pressure of additional responsibilities. Try to be caring, even if you find the person's behaviour challenging.

HOW CAN I HELP?

WHAT SHOULD I AVOID?

- Do not force the person to talk.
- Do not interrupt them to share your own feelings and experiences.
- Do not minimise their experience, or compare it to others, e.g. “It could be worse” or “At least you’re not sick”
- Do not offer religious solace by saying things like “God has reasons”
- Do not discourage the person from expressing their feelings, e.g. don’t tell a person to stop crying or cheer up.
- Do not tell the person how they should be feeling.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT THE PERSON OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS OR MONTHS?

Uncertainty about how long we may be required to distance ourselves from others can be especially upsetting. Conflict at home is possible, with people feeling trapped and frustrated. With reduced access to coping strategies and social outlets, it may be easier to fall into negative coping strategies such as drinking too much alcohol – which can make things worse in the long term.

It can be helpful to maintain some routines such as regular meals, regular exercise (observing social distancing rules) and connecting with friends and family over voice and video calls.

When the pandemic has passed enough for social distancing rules to be relaxed, there will be a period of adjustment. People recover at their own pace. Some people may be more sensitive to events or stress for a while and some days will be worse than others.

Concerns about germs, viruses and infection may lead to distress in some people over the coming months and years.

SHOULD THE PERSON SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Some people are experiencing extreme distress and may wish to talk to a professional about it.

Some people will experience chronic stress over the next several months at least. This can erode normal resilience and coping mechanisms.

Some people might need professional help during this crisis and others later on. Feeling very distressed all the time, having nightmares or flashbacks, having trouble thinking about anything else, and withdrawing from loved ones are all signs that professional help might be needed.

A GP can help determine the best option for professional help.



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Based on: Mental Health First Aid Australia. *Assisting a Person Following a Potentially Traumatic Event: Mental Health First Aid Guidelines* (revised 2019). Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2019.

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All MHFA guidelines can be downloaded from mhfa.com.au/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines

If the person expresses thoughts of suicide, seek help by calling:

Lifeline **13 11 14**

Suicide Call-back Service **1300 659 467**

Help can also be sought from:

Kids Helpline **1800 55 1800** or kidshelpline.com.au
(For young people under 25)

Beyond Blue **1300 22 4636** or beyondblue.org.au

Sane Australia **1800 18 7263** or sane.org

QLife for LGBTIQ+ people **1800 184 527**
(3pm – 12am) or qlife.org.au

Resources about COVID-19:

[Health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au)

The coronavirus app for iOS and Android
1800 020 080