



HELPING EACH OTHER AND OURSELVES USING MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

By Johnna G. Story and Jessie Spressart



The mental health crisis among law students, attorneys, and business professionals has been well documented. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic — with upended work schedules, the blurring of work and home, shifting family care needs, not to mention physical health concerns — our collective mental health has taken a hit.

We all know this, but what can we do to help ourselves and others? Where do we even start? Many people are afraid of saying the wrong thing to someone who may be experiencing a mental health challenge and are

concerned about potentially making a problem even worse. Others feel uncomfortable saying anything at all, especially at work, due to the misconception that it's inappropriate to address mental health concerns in a professional context. Individuals who are experiencing a mental health challenge like depression, anxiety, or substance use issues are often afraid to speak up because of the stigma associated with doing so and because of potential repercussions of making their condition known — even to trusted colleagues.

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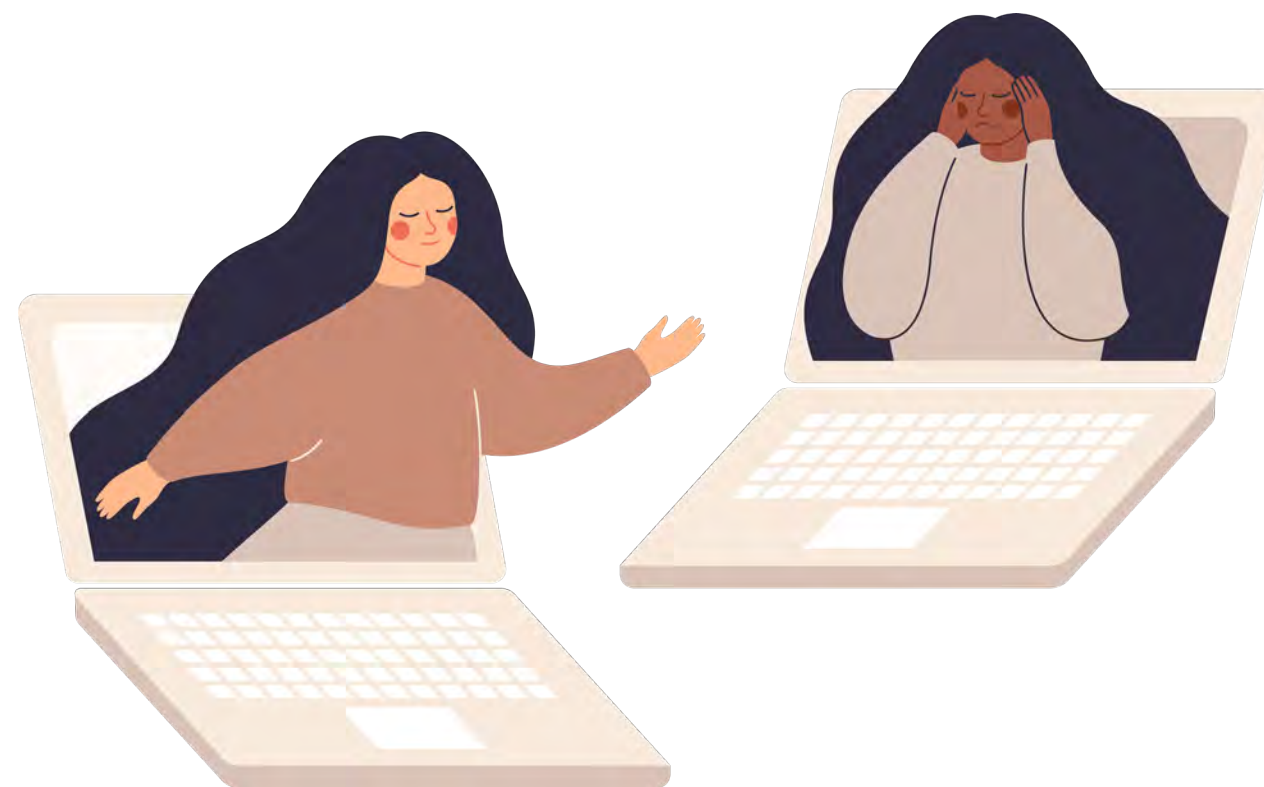
Leaders in organizations often ask, “how do we help someone in crisis?” and the fundamental answer is early intervention. Just like many physical health scenarios, helping people manage their mental health *before* it gets to a crisis means a higher likelihood of positive outcomes than waiting until too much damage has been done. Recognizing signs and symptoms of a mental health challenge can be difficult, however, especially in the hybrid world in which we are living and working these days.

One way to help organizations support their people’s mental health — before the crisis stage — is to offer training in Mental Health First Aid. A national curriculum offered by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Mental Health First Aid teaches participants about the risk factors and warning signs of

mental health challenges and offers concrete tools to help support people dealing with these challenges and connect them with support. Studies show that people who are certified in Mental Health First Aid are more comfortable when approaching others who may be experiencing mental health challenges and are more aware of signs and symptoms when mental health issues are present in themselves and others. The program sensitively tackles heavy subjects, including depression, panic attacks, substance use, and suicidal thoughts. In addition to training on these topics, the curriculum (which was heavily revised in 2020) includes a focus on self-care which is important for everyone to practice whether they are experiencing a mental health challenge or not.

Mental Health Training at Finnegan

Law firms are starting to embrace Mental Health First Aid training and certification. One firm, Finnegan, has found it to be a helpful addition to their well-being initiative, which was kicking into high gear just as the pandemic started. This was good in some respects: the initiative got the attention and engagement of those who might otherwise have not given it a second glance in “normal



times,” however, it was more of a challenge because there was additional pressure on the well-being team to make an immediate impact. When Finnegan heard about the Mental Health First Aid program, the firm saw an opportunity to enable not just the Well-Being Team to notice potential issues, but also to equip other staff and attorneys with tools to recognize when potential issues arise with each other.

The firm decided to pilot the certification for 20 people and emphasized that it was important to bring in an instructor to conduct

the training in-house rather than utilize a public course. The value of having a shared experience with colleagues was important for many reasons — chief among them being for all participants to be able to share the vocabulary with each other to lessen the stigma that firms still have those who struggle with mental health issues. In addition, having an instructor who has legal industry experience also helped make the content and concepts more readily applicable to the law firm environment.

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The fundamental answer to helping someone in crisis is early intervention.

Finnegan divided the 20 participants into two groups, with 10 staff participants having participated in fall 2021, and an additional 10 attorneys and staff enrolled in their next program in early 2022. While fortunately none of the skills have yet to be needed professionally, all participants report feeling much more comfortable in recognizing and confident in addressing an issue that might arise at work or in their personal lives.

The firm recognizes that PD and Human Resources staff are often not on the front line or interacting with attorneys on a regular basis so they may miss immediate signs of an issue that is building over time, or when a mental health crisis arises. Therefore, it has been a key part of their plan to train and certify attorneys as well as business professionals. Attorneys who work closely together every day need to be equipped to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges — to prevent the usual amount of work stress boiling over into an immediate crisis or becoming a chronic problem.

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One participant particularly appreciated the emphasis on the importance of self-care: “As HR and PD professionals and caregivers, we are tasked with being the sounding board and support system for a number of people. While it is sometimes easy to provide these solutions and resources to them, it is not always easy for us to take that advice ourselves. This program reinforced the necessity of self-care and taking a moment to catch your breath and rejuvenate. If you aren’t in a good place, you can’t effectively help others.”

Having many individuals across attorney and professional functions certified in Mental Health First Aid at any firm or organization can achieve multiple positive outcomes, including de-stigmatizing discussing mental health issues; recognizing and addressing

potential issues before they reach crisis mode; and providing the help and care individuals need so they can be their best self, both personally and at work. Please contact us if you’d like more information and to explore if Mental Health First Aid certification would be a good fit for you and your organization.

Join NALP during March for webinars about well-being and mental health first aid, including *Preparing for Well-Being Week in Law* on March 17. Learn more and register at www.nalp.org/events. For more resources on well-being, visit NALP’s [Well-Being in the Legal Profession web page](#). +



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