

Mental Health First Aid Kit

Information for Almoners

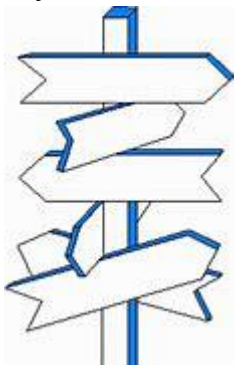
Mental health problems will generally strike one in four individuals at some time during their lives. The recent advent of Covid has both highlighted the issue and exacerbated the problem due to increased isolation and loneliness. These problems of course, apply equally to our masonic brethren. It is to help you deal with any issues you may come across amongst your lodge members that this document is being produced. Please use it as an aide memoire, but feel free to contact any of the Mental Health First Aid practitioners in the Provincial Almoner Team if you require any further help.

Good mental health is *"a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"*, (World Health Organisation)

You will probably be aware of terms such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, (anorexia, bulimia), self-harm, and bipolar disorder, (previously known as schizophrenia). All are characterised by differing symptoms and can only be diagnosed by competent authorities. You will be relieved to know that detailed knowledge of any of these issues is NOT required at the level of the lodge almoner.

The almoner's role is one of being aware of the issue, not to go looking for mental health problems, but to recognise them when they arise and not be afraid to assist when they do. Just as you look to alleviate your member's physical health issues, their mental health should figure in what you do.

If you read the tabloid press, you could be forgiven for believing that all sufferers of mental health problems are violent, aggressive and dangerous individuals, but the reality is that this is not the case. Withdrawal from society, a change in habits or personality can be signs that an individual is suffering mental health issues, and it is these changes in your lodge members that you might observe. Such changes can be caused by traumatic events such



as bereavement, illness, family problems, unemployment, and the like. You should not be afraid to approach these individuals, talk to them, identify their problems and signpost them to the masonic and outside support, advice, and treatment that they need. The following will help you realise that ambition, and a brief directory of useful addresses is appended to this document.

If you do recognize that a brother has a mental health issue, you can offer mental health first aid, just as you would offer first aid if he'd suffered a physical injury. And as with physical first aid, you give it until appropriate professional help is received or until the crisis appears to have been resolved. Don't ignore the symptoms or simply assume that they will go away.

The first and most difficult thing is to approach him. Choose a suitable time and place and when the opportunity presents itself, ask him how he's feeling. Encourage him to open up to you. Listen to him without interrupting, prompting when necessary and asking questions to clarify what he's saying. Make it clear that you're listening to him by eye contact and body language, and perhaps by reflecting back what he's saying. Avoid telling him of any similar experience that you or another may have had but concentrate on his problems. Don't be judgmental.

Don't try to minimise his problems and avoid the use of humour which might make him feel you're not taking him seriously. Don't argue with him or offer glib advice. You don't have to agree with him. You can acknowledge what he's saying without either agreeing or disagreeing.

Give emotional support and understanding. Give him hope of recovery and tell him what help is available. Encourage him to seek that help and offer to assist him in seeking it. Make the offer in terms that requires his positive response, offering options, and respect his right not to seek help while reassuring him that you will support him whatever his decision.

You must respect his privacy, but encourage him to enlist the help of family and friends in listening, encouraging and giving practical and emotional support. Loneliness and a feeling of isolation can be major factors in mental health problems.

A person with mental health problems can make a quicker and fuller recovery with professional health. There are a number of options available, such as medication, counselling and support with family, employment, or financial problems.

The Brother's GP may be able to help by a referral to an appropriate expert, or a counsellor, psychologist or psychotherapist can be found by a Google search. There are many specialist support groups such as Anxiety UK, Cruse Bereavement Care, Help for Heroes and Alcoholics Anonymous. The Provincial Almoner has a list of such groups. The MCF may be able to help. It offers telephone counselling as well as medical and financial support. There is also the WRMCL Care and Support team. Contact the Provincial Almoner or one of the Assistant Almoners, who will be able to give you more information.

It can be difficult helping someone who is in distress. You must ensure your personal safety if dealing with someone who may be volatile. You may feel worn out, frustrated or angry after an encounter. If so it can be helpful if you talk about what has happened with someone else, but remember to respect the privacy of the person you have been helping. Don't give his name or personal details to anyone you choose to share with, with the important exception if you feel that the individual concerned is at risk to himself or others.

If you want any help or advice, some members of the Provincial Almoner's team have attended a course run by MHFA England. Contact the Provincial Almoner for their contact details.