

**Are You Ok? Bolstering Student Mental Health First Aid Awareness
and Training Ahead of Internship and Student Teaching Experiences**

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Introduction/Need for Idea

Today's college students are dealing with mental health challenges at increasing rates (Abrams, 2022). With more than 60% of post-secondary students meeting the criteria for at least one mental health problem (Abrams, 2022), an increasing need exists to expand the support of students experiencing challenges and to train students to help identify and address signs and symptoms of mental health challenges in the people around them. One way to empower students with increased awareness is to provide Mental Health First Aid training and certification.

Just as programs exist to help individuals act when there are physical health challenges (choking, wounds, and accidents), Mental Health First Aid is an evidence-based, early-intervention course that provides participants with knowledge and resources to address mental health and substance abuse challenges (MHFA, 2024).

At Tarleton State University, seniors in their final semester of the Agricultural Education, Agricultural Industries and Agencies, and Agricultural Communications programs participate in the "Block" semester. Block students spend the first three weeks of the semester in intensive preparatory sessions with faculty members and the remainder of the semester engaged in student teaching (Agricultural Education) or internship (Agricultural Industries and Agencies and Agricultural Communications) experiences. Recognizing these students will go on to be Agricultural Educators, Extension Agents, and industry professionals, there is a need to help them not only develop healthy opportunities for self-care, but also have the tools to provide support to others who may be showing signs and symptoms of mental health challenges (Cuthbertson et al., 2022; Wippel, 2023; Carver, 2023; MHFA, 2024).

The need to provide mental health first aid is further reinforced by the mental health challenges inherent in the agricultural industry. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates have increased 46% in rural communities between 2000 and 2020 (Carver, 2023; CDC, 2024), which is almost 20% more than the increase in urban areas. Rural residents also have 1.5 times higher rate of emergency department visits for nonfatal self-harm than urban residents (CDC, 2024). Given that most of our block students will live and work in rural and agricultural communities, a greater need exists to develop the abilities to assess and address mental health challenges in their communities.

How it Works

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) program is a 7.5-hour certification course that teaches "how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders" (MHFA, 2024). The innovative idea was implemented with both pre-service teachers and pre-internship students. The goal was to explore the value of mental health-focused training for students ahead of their clinical teaching and internship experiences.

Students ($n = 32$) participated in the day-long training during one class session of their clinical teaching and internship experiences. Students completed seven course segments that focused on the mental health first aid action plan, early signs and symptoms of mental health issues, worsening signs and symptoms, crisis situations, and self-care. Students completed a pre-survey before the session, had a processing guide, and took a post-survey at the end of the training. To obtain the certification attached to the course, students had to complete two hours of prework, the 5.5 hour in-person training, and the post-course survey.

Results to Date/Implications

Of the students certified, 21 indicated that the course was helpful and informative and 14 felt the course better prepared them for the work they will do professionally. Students noted the course allowed them to learn about their own mental health and how to help others. The videos and scenario work built into the MHFA training was positively received by the students and enabled them to better understand when and how to apply the mental health first aid action plan. Feedback from the students indicated they found the frankness of the conversation, with the instructors and each other, to be extremely helpful in terms of addressing stigmas of mental health and finding ways to start conversations they may have avoided.

Agricultural Education students were already certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid, but not the adult version of the program. Given this pre-existing awareness, pre- and post-course surveys show a higher baseline understanding for this group as compared to their peers in the Agricultural Industries and Agencies and Agricultural Communications programs. Agricultural Education students noted that while the youth training was helpful, they found the adult training to be much more in-depth and relatable. Additionally, they felt there were aspects presented that could be used with youth as well. Implications from this training indicate the potential for a positive impact for all students in these majors and potentially others.

Future Plans/Advice

Given student feedback and support, we will host the blended certification process again for Spring 2025 graduates. We would like to study the usefulness of this training across their internship or clinical teaching experiences to better assess the usefulness of the training across their first year of employment.

In addition, we will pursue other grants to secure funding for faculty to gain Mental Health First Aid Youth Instructor certifications and complete the training for the Rural Concentration offered by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. The goal is to expand the mental health training beyond these three majors and offer the certification to more students and faculty/staff members.

A long-term desire exists to explore the potential to develop agriculture-specific mental health resources that would complement the efforts of the Texas Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture focusing on farmer mental health and suicide prevention (Carver, 2023); the AgriSafe Network (www.agrisafe.org), a non-profit founded in 2003 by rural nurses with the goal of improving the health and safety (physical and mental) of farmers ranchers (AgriSafe, 2024); and global initiatives like ifarmwell out of Australia (www.ifarmwell.com.au).

Costs/Resources Needed

The Mental Health First Aid Training requires a certified instructor to conduct the certification for students. Two Tarleton State University faculty earned the MHFA certification training (\$2,200 each) through the National Council on Mental Wellbeing. Per student cost for the certification is \$25 for the blended registration fee and \$25 for the hard copy manual. The institution received a mini grant from the Southwest Agriculture Center to cover the costs for students. Programs are also available to provide this certification at no cost.

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