

Mental health program helps teens recognise and support peers at risk

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A novel mental health program improves teenagers' ability to recognise and support friends who might be at risk of suicide, according to new research.

University of Melbourne researchers have evaluated the impact of teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA) - a universal mental health literacy program for [high school students](#) in Years 10-12—as an intervention to improve [peer support](#) towards adolescents at risk of suicide.

Researchers analysed [survey data](#) from more than 800 Year 10—12 students from four government [secondary schools](#) who had participated in the 3 x 75-minute classroom-based [training program](#). This was compared with students who completed a matched control physical first aid course.

Researchers found students who participated in the tMHFA training were 35 times more likely to report adequate suicide first aid than those in the control group. This includes noticing something is wrong, asking if their friend is OK and suggesting they tell an adult.

Results suggested that student knowledge of the general warning signs of mental health problems and confidence to offer support was more important than having specific knowledge of suicide—calling into question suicide specific education programs in schools.

tMHFA students reported higher levels of distress following the training than the students who received physical first aid, however most distress often lasted from a few moments to a few hours. The 12-month follow up confirmed that this experience was fleeting and not associated with long-term harm.

University of Melbourne Senior Research Fellow Laura Hart said the findings demonstrate the importance of embedding suicide-prevention information within general mental health programs in schools and increasing peer support and discussion opportunities.

"Young people account for nearly one third of the 800,000 people who die by suicide each year, with suicide a leading cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds," Dr. Hart said.

"Three in four [young people](#) report that they would first turn to a friend for help if they were considering suicide. We need to equip teenagers with the skills and knowledge to recognise [warning signs](#) and get appropriate help for their friends."

This research has been published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*.

More information: Laura M Hart et al, teen Mental Health First Aid as a school-based intervention for improving peer support of adolescents at risk of suicide: Outcomes from a cluster randomised crossover trial, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0004867419885450](https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867419885450)

Provided by University of Melbourne

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