

# Embedding a Mental Health First Aid Certification course into OT curriculum

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# Introduction

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- 1 in 5 U.S. adults live with a mental illness
- Young adults aged 18-25 years
  - 36.2% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023)
  - 50% of these report receiving treatment
  - **\*\*large gap in treatment\*\***

# Ithaca College Curriculum

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- Small school (4,600 students) in the middle of NYS
- BS/MS (5 years) and BS/OTD (6 years)
- Students enter first year
- Chose the degree pathway in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study
- Curricular redesign
  - Enhanced Mental Health Content
  - How can we better prepare our students?



# Mental Health First Aid

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- Evidence based training program
- Teaches how to recognize the signs of mental illness
- Provide immediate help and support
- Skills based
- Interactive 8-hour training with pre/post work
- Developed by Jorm and Kitchener (2000)
- 29 countries
  
- \*\*grant from ASAP funded instructor training



# Methodology: Focus Group

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- 31 students became certified (2025)
  - 8-hr in person (embedded in a MH course)
  - Two 4-hr session (before the MH Course)
- Recruited volunteers for focus group
  - N = 7
    - 4 from two 4-hr session
    - 3 from 8-hr session
- Transcripts were analyzed
- Open coding
- Thematic analysis

# Theme one: Confidence building

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- “increased confidence to approach others”
- “Confidence to have the scary conversations”
  
- Discussed specific skill development
  - Listening
  - Empathy
  - Active responses

# Theme Two: Support don't fix

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- The importance of emphatic listening, being present, and proactively following up with others.
- “learned to actively listen and make them feel heard without jumping into a solution”
- “I try to fix, but learned it is important and helpful to just listen and reflect back”
- “aim for listening and empathy around a supportive not a fix mindset”

# Theme three: Safe space

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- The experience led to an enhanced feeling of safety, trust, and community amongst students
- “safe space to share experiences”
- “talk openly about suicide in a safe space”

# Theme four: Professional Preparation

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- Skill building
- Practice with “scary”
- Knowing resources
  
- “helps to objectify it all a little bit”
- “definitely destigmatizes-I can talk more openly with others”
  
- Thinking to the future:
- “others may have more confidence in my abilities”

# Summary

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- Students found the MHFA certification course beneficial
- Surprised by the enhanced sense of community
- Recommend it becomes a permanent part of the curriculum
  
- Believe all OT FACULTY should become trained as well

# Next Steps

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- Offering certification to Department Chairs
- Offering to clinic students from other disciplines
  - Interprofessional Education opportunity
- Follow up with this group when in first year of employment



Questions?

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# References

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