Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Participant Resource Guide

This guide is intended to supplement, not replace, the Mental Health First Aid curriculum. It offers information and resources to help MHFA participants better support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who may be experiencing mental health challenges.

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1. What Is IDD?

Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are lifelong conditions that begin during childhood or adolescence and can affect learning, communication, behavior, mobility, daily living skills, and independent functioning. Examples include autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

Every Person With IDD Is Unique

Some people live independently and need minimal support. Others need extensive assistance with daily activities. The level of support a person needs does not determine their intelligence, value, competence, or right to make choices about their own life.

Key Principles

- ✓ Every person is an individual.
- ✓ Avoid assumptions based on diagnosis.
- ✓ Assume competence whenever possible.
- ✓ Focus on strengths and capabilities.
- ✓ Respect autonomy and self-determination.

2. Understanding Support Needs

Support needs vary significantly from person to person. A person may need support in areas such as:

- Communication
- Housing
- Employment
- Transportation
- Healthcare
- Mental health services
- Community participation

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), support needs may range from intermittent to pervasive and may change over time.

Important Reminders

- Support needs do not determine intelligence.
- Support needs do not determine decision-making rights.
- A person may need high support in one area and minimal support in another.
- Support needs may increase during times of stress, illness, trauma, or mental health challenges.

3. Mental Health and IDD

People with IDD experience the same mental health conditions as anyone else. These may include:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Bipolar disorder
- Psychosis
- Substance use disorders
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviors

Research consistently shows elevated rates of co-occurring mental health conditions among people with IDD.

Mental Health and IDD Are Not the Same Thing

A person may have IDD only, a mental health condition only, or both IDD and a mental health condition. IDD is generally lifelong. Mental health conditions may develop at any age, be episodic, improve with treatment, or change over time. Understanding the distinction helps ensure people receive appropriate support and treatment.

4. Diagnostic Overshadowing

What Is Diagnostic Overshadowing?

Diagnostic overshadowing happens when symptoms of a mental health condition are incorrectly attributed to a person's disability rather than recognized as a separate concern.

Examples

Instead of "Maybe they're experiencing depression."

Someone says "They're acting that way because they have a disability."

Instead of "Maybe they're struggling with anxiety."

Someone says "That's just part of autism."

When This Happens

- Mental illness may go untreated.
- People may not receive needed services.
- Crisis risk can increase.
- Quality of life may decrease.

What MHFAiders Can Do

- Look for changes from baseline.
- Stay curious.
- Ask questions.
- Consider physical health factors.
- Consider trauma.
- Consider environmental stressors.
- Encourage professional assessment.

5. Common Characteristics and Behaviors

Many people with IDD may show characteristics such as:

- Hand flapping
- Rocking
- Fidgeting
- Repeating words or phrases
- Avoiding eye contact
- Preference for routines
- Intense interests
- Monotone or atypical speech patterns

These characteristics alone are not signs of a mental health crisis.

Focus on Changes From Baseline

More meaningful indicators may include:

- Withdrawal
- Increased anxiety
- Significant behavior changes
- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite changes
- Increased distress
- Functional decline

These changes often provide more information than the person's diagnosis.

6. Environmental Accommodations

Some people with IDD experience sensory sensitivities that can add to distress during a mental health challenge. Helpful accommodations may include:

- ✓ Moving to a quieter location
- ✓ Reducing visual distractions
- ✓ Dimming lights
- ✓ Limiting the number of people talking
- ✓ Reducing strong smells
- ✓ Offering sensory supports
- ✓ Creating physical space
- ✓ Allowing time for self-regulation

Small environmental changes can reduce stress and improve communication.

7. Communication Tips for MHFAiders

When interacting with a person with IDD:

Do

- ✓ Speak directly to the individual.
- ✓ Use plain language.
- ✓ Use your normal tone of voice.
- ✓ Treat adults as adults.
- ✓ Speak calmly and clearly.
- ✓ Use one question at a time.
- ✓ Use short sentences.
- ✓ Allow extra processing time.
- ✓ Count silently to five after asking a question.
- ✓ Use concrete examples.
- ✓ Be direct and literal.
- ✓ Check understanding respectfully.

Avoid

- ✗ Speaking only to support staff.
- ✗ Making assumptions.
- ✗ Using jargon.
- ✗ Multi-step directions.
- ✗ Rushing.
- ✗ Using sarcasm.
- ✗ Using idioms and figures of speech.

Examples

Instead of "Let's not open that can of worms."

Say "Let's talk about that issue later."

Instead of "Read between the lines."

Say "Tell me what you think this means."

Plain language reduces confusion and supports effective communication.

8. Respectful Language

Both person-first and identity-first language can be appropriate.

Person-First Language

- Person with autism
- Person with a disability
- Person with Down syndrome

Identity-First Language

- Autistic person
- Disabled person

Best Practice

> *Ask the person "How would you like me to refer to your disability?"*

Respect the individual's preference.

Avoid

- ✗ The r-word
- ✗ Handicapped
- ✗ Crippled
- ✗ Other stigmatizing language

9. Applying ALGEE With Individuals With IDD

A: Assess for Risk of Suicide or Harm

Look for:

- Changes from baseline
- Withdrawal
- Increased distress
- Statements about death
- Self-harm concerns
- Escalating behavior

Do not assume a person with IDD is protected from suicide risk.

L: Listen Nonjudgmentally

- Validate feelings.
- Allow processing time.
- Clarify as needed.
- Avoid assumptions.
- Focus on understanding.

Try "Tell me more about that."

Try "That sounds difficult."

Try "I'm glad you're talking with me."

G: Give Reassurance and Information

Try "Help is available."

Try "You deserve support."

Try "What you're experiencing is important."

Avoid minimizing concerns.

E: Encourage Appropriate Professional Help

- Primary care provider
- Therapist
- Psychiatrist
- Community mental health program
- Crisis services
- Developmental disability services

E: Encourage Self-Help and Other Supports

- Family supports
- Peer supports
- Meaningful activities
- Exercise
- Sleep hygiene
- Structured routines
- Cultural supports
- Spiritual supports

10. Trauma and IDD

Research consistently shows that people with IDD experience elevated rates of abuse, bullying, neglect, exploitation, and other adverse life experiences.

Possible Trauma Responses

- Anxiety
- Hypervigilance
- Avoidance
- Sleep disruption
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Self-injury

Trauma-Informed Principles

✓ Safety
✓ Choice
✓ Trustworthiness
✓ Collaboration
✓ Empowerment

Focus on strengths and resilience.

11. Suicide Prevention Considerations

Important reminders:

- People with IDD can experience suicidal thoughts.
- Take all statements seriously.
- Ask direct questions.
- Follow MHFA guidance.
- Connect people with crisis resources.

When immediate support is needed, call or text 988.

12. IDD and the Criminal Justice System

The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability® (NCCJD®)

NCCJD serves as a bridge between the criminal justice and disability communities. NCCJD pursues and promotes safety, fairness, and justice for people with IDD and co-occurring mental health and IDD, especially those with hidden disabilities and marginalized identities, as victims, witnesses, suspects, defendants, and incarcerated persons.

To ensure access to justice for people with IDD, NCCJD is working to:

1. Advocate with and for people with IDD, especially those with other marginalized identities, facing criminal justice involvement, by providing information and referral services.
2. Empower The Arc Oregon and other chapters of The Arc to become the go-to resources on criminal justice and disability in their communities, through Pathways to Justice® and peer learning.
3. Increase training, knowledge, and awareness of criminal justice professionals about people with IDD, including their legal obligations toward the disability community, through Pathways to Justice and other learning platforms.
4. Ensure people with disabilities are leading the charge on all policy, training, and related efforts to reform the criminal justice system.

5. Support effective research and evaluation to promote innovative best practices, including the collection and publication of key resources for the field.

Website: thearc.org/our-initiatives/criminal-justice

13. Where to Refer? Quick Referral Guide

→ Immediate crisis: Call or text 988

→ Local crisis services: County mental health crisis line

→ Youth support: YouthLine

→ Peer support: Oregon Warmline

→ Native American / Alaska Native support: StrongHearts Native Helpline

→ LGBTQIA+ peer support: Trans Lifeline

→ IDD services: Oregon Office of Developmental Disabilities Services (ODDS)

→ IDD and mental health information: NADD

→ Advocacy and family support: The Arc Oregon

14. Oregon Mental Health & IDD Resource Directory

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Call or text: 988 Website: 988lifeline.org Chat: 988lifeline.org/chat
NAMI Oregon	Phone: 503-230-8009 National helpline: 800-950-6264 Website: namior.org
County Mental Health Crisis Lines	Directory: namior.org/county-mental-health-departments Lane County: 541-687-4000 Marion County: 503-585-4949 Multnomah County: 503-988-4888 Washington County: 503-291-9111 Deschutes County: 541-322-7500
David Romprey Oregon Warmline	Phone: 800-698-2392 Hours: 9:00 a.m.– 11:00 p.m. daily
YouthLine	Call: 877-968-8491 Text: teen2teen to 839863 Website: oregonyouthline.org
StrongHearts Native Helpline	Call: 844-762-8483 Website: strongheartshelpline.org
Trans Lifeline	Call: 877-565-8860 Website: translifeline.org

Oregon Office of Developmental Disabilities Services (ODDS)	Website: oregon.gov/odhs/idd
NADD (National Association for the Dually Diagnosed)	Phone: 845-331-4336 Website: thenadd.org
The Arc Oregon	Phone: 503-581-2726 Email: training@thearcoregon.org Website: thearcoregon.org

15. Quick Takeaways

- ✓ People with IDD experience mental health conditions.
- ✓ Mental health conditions and IDD are not the same thing.
- ✓ Avoid diagnostic overshadowing.
- ✓ Focus on changes from baseline.
- ✓ Use plain language.
- ✓ Allow extra processing time.
- ✓ Respect autonomy and self-determination.
- ✓ Consider trauma and sensory needs.
- ✓ Apply ALGEE thoughtfully.
- ✓ Connect people to resources and support.

16. References and Further Learning

IDD Organizations

- **The Arc Oregon** – statewide advocacy, guardianship, and family support. https://thearcoregon.org
- **The Arc (National)** – national advocacy for people with IDD. https://thearc.org
- **AAIDD** American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. https://www.aaidd.org
- **NCCJD** The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability® – information, referral, and training on criminal justice and disability. https://thearc.org/our-initiatives/criminal-justice/

Mental Health & IDD Resources

- **NADD** National Association for the Dually Diagnosed – mental health and IDD training and resources. https://thenadd.org
- **Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)** – national MHFA curriculum and statewide resources. https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org
- **NAMI Oregon** National Alliance on Mental Illness, Oregon affiliate. https://namior.org

Oregon Crisis and Support Resources

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** https://988lifeline.org
- **Oregon Office of Developmental Disabilities Services (ODDS)** https://www.oregon.gov/odhs/idd
- **YouthLine** https://oregonyouthline.org
- **David Romprey Oregon Warmline** Phone: 800-698-2392
- **StrongHearts Native Helpline** https://strongheartshelpline.org

- **Trans Lifeline** https://translifeline.org

Source Materials Used to Develop This Guide

- **The Arc Oregon** Communication Tips for MHFA Participants (2025).
- **Mental Health First Aid** statewide curriculum and supplemental IDD guidance.
- **NADD** training and consultation resources on mental health and IDD.
- **Oregon ODDS** program and services resources.
- **NAMI Oregon** county crisis line directory and support resources.
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** public resources and guidance.
- **SafeGuards IDD Resource List** safeguards-training.net.
- **Oregon State University Family Resources** national disability resource directory.