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LEARNING | GROWING | ADVANCING | TOGETHER

2026

AAOHN NATIONAL CONFERENCE



ORLANDO, FLORIDA

ROSEN SHINGLE CREEK

Enhancing Psychological Safety in Academia: The Role of Mental Health First Aid Training for University Faculty

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2026

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Disclosures:

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Successful completion: Complete the evaluation form for this session.

Disclosures: None of the planners or presenters for this activity have a relevant financial relationship to disclose with ineligible companies.



The Journey: From Challenge to Solution



This roadmap outlines the core areas we will explore, demonstrating the progression from identifying systemic challenges to implementing effective, evidence-based solutions.



The Reality of Academic Life



Hidden strain



Publishing pressure



Culture of silence



Emotional labor

Bridging the Gap: Cultivating a Culture of Care



Hidden strain

- Publishing pressure
- Culture of silence
- Emotional labor



Psychological safety

- Connection
- Support



Thriving

- Every voice heard
- Support to grow



Why Employee Wellbeing Matters?



Wellbeing influences
absenteeism, turnover,
productivity



Supportive workplaces =
better outcomes



Psychological safety as a
critical factor

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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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What is psychological safety?

“ The belief that we won’t be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. ”

Amy C. Edmondson

Professor of Leadership and Management
Harvard Business School





What is Psychological Safety?



Speak up



Without fear



Not just nice



Safe culture

What Is Psychological Safety?



Safe to Speak

Individuals can express concerns, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences



Safe to Be

People feel accepted and valued for who they are, bringing their whole selves to work and learning



Safe to Innovate

Environments where taking calculated risks and proposing new ideas is encouraged and supported

Psychological safety creates the foundation for thriving academic communities where mental health is prioritized and supported.

The Culture of Silence & Invisible Emotional Labor



Above the Surface

Outward Calm: The 'Duck on a Pond' Paradox

Projected Expertise

Faculty stand before lecture halls projecting effortless competence, intellectual invulnerability, and absolute control.

The Academic Stigma

A systemic culture falsely equates human vulnerability or mental health challenges with intellectual weakness and professional inadequacy.

Beneath the Surface

Hidden Turbulence: Frantic Paddling

Unmeasured Labor

Providing pastoral care, absorbing secondary trauma, and managing student crises remain entirely unrewarded and absent from any syllabus.

The Isolation Trap

Self-stigma takes root in the shadows, forcing brilliant minds into isolation and actively suffocating opportunities for early intervention.

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**MENTAL
HEALTH
FIRST AID**

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What is MHFA?



Structured training
program



Enhances
recognition skills.

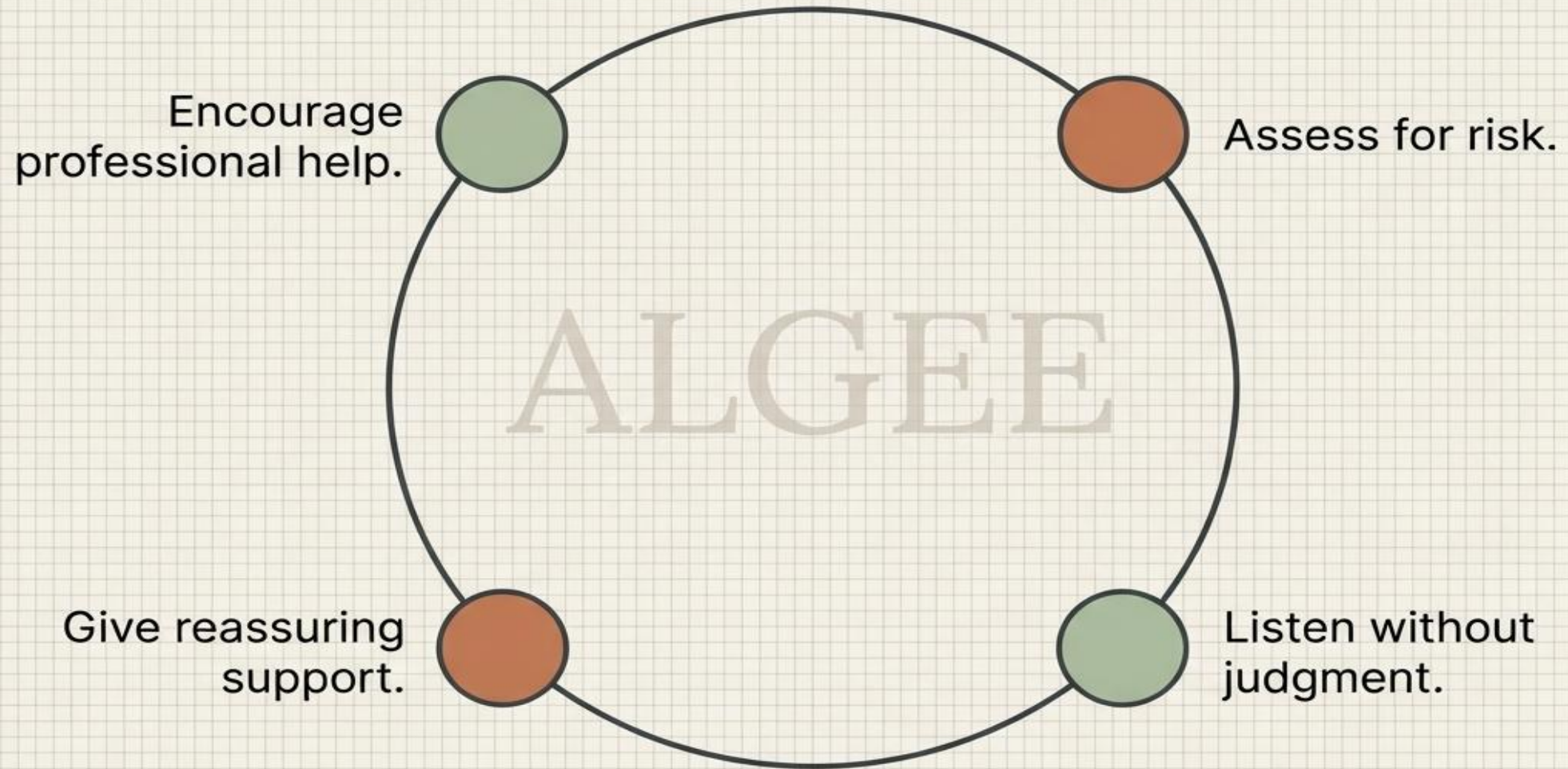


Equips early
response.



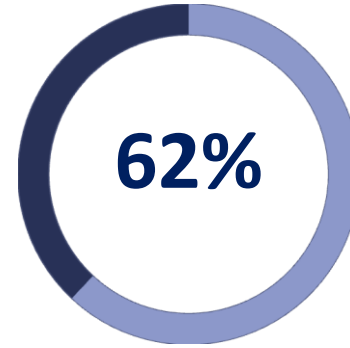
Builds mental
literacy.

The Core Framework

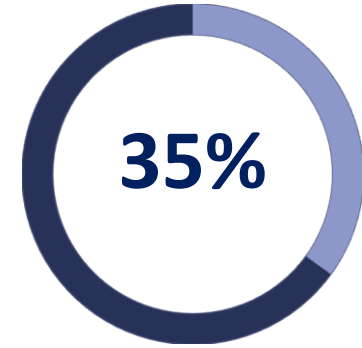




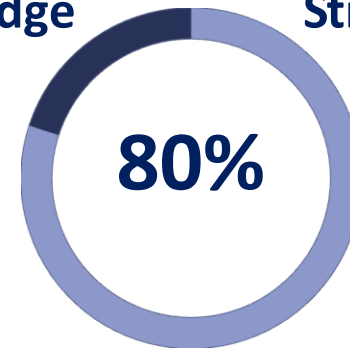
MHFA Training Effectiveness in the Literature



Increase in
Mental Health Knowledge



Reduction in
Stigmatizing Attitudes



Boost in
Helping Confidence & Behavior

Research, including a [PLOS One meta-analysis](#) and [BMC Psychiatry studies](#), consistently demonstrates the profound impact of MHFA training on individuals and individuals and communities.



The ALGEE Action Plan: 5 Pillars of MHFA

Five clear steps for responding with confidence, care, and structure in a mental health first aid conversation.



A — Assess risk

Check for immediate danger to self or others.



L — Listen non-judgmentally

Create a calm, supportive space to talk.



G — Give reassurance and information

Offer hope, clarity, and practical guidance.



E — Encourage professional help

Connect them to the right mental health support.



E — Encourage self-help

Promote coping strategies and support networks.

The Proactive Shift

1

Reactive Model

Waiting for crisis

Reactive responses

Stigma persists

2

Proactive Model

Early detection

Preventive care

Stigma reduction

MHFA training removes hesitation and empowers individuals to intervene confidently at the first signs of struggle, preventing escalation and building community resilience.

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**WHAT DID OUR
SCIENTIFIC
STUDY TELL
US?**

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Our Approach: Mental Health Health First Aid

01

Research Design

Randomized Controlled Trial with 86 staff members across university settings

02

Training Program

Comprehensive 8-hour Mental Health First Aid certification course

03

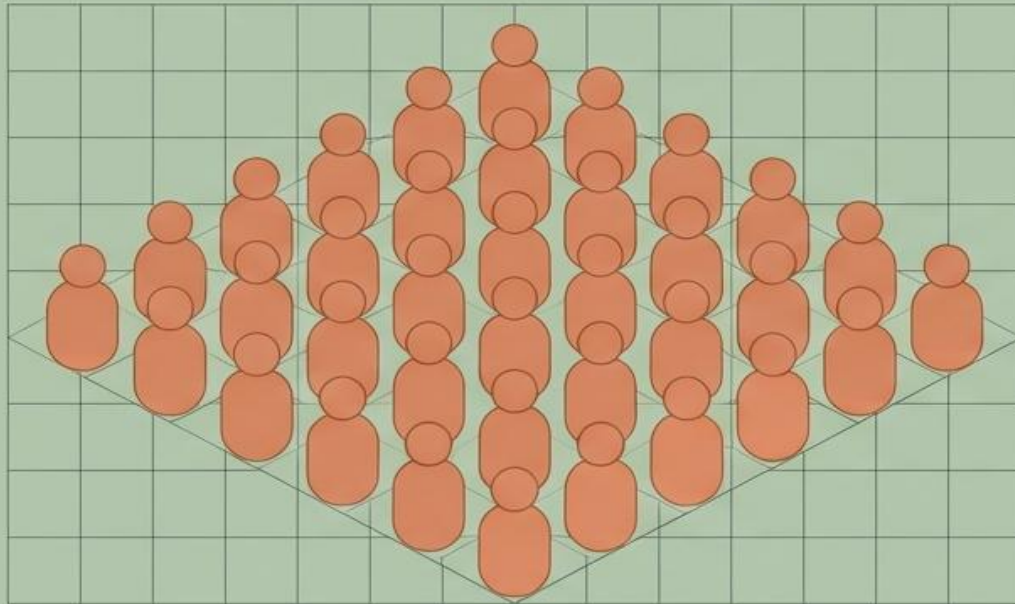
Outcome Measures

Psychological Safety assessment and Mental Health Literacy Literacy evaluation

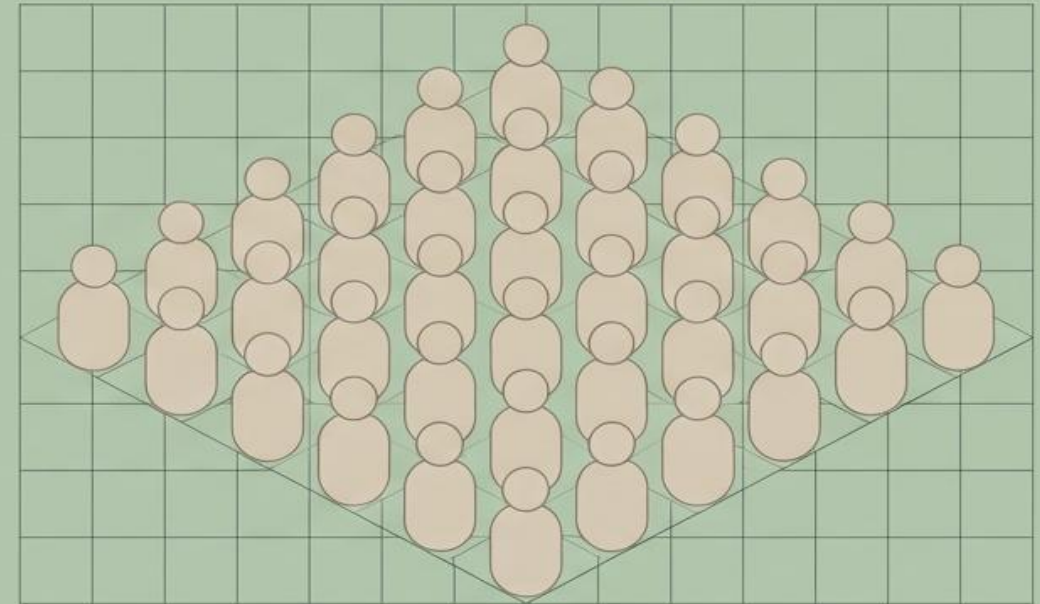


The Study Design

Intervention Group



Control Group



Randomized
Controlled Trial.

86 Total
Participants.

Academic
workplace setting.

The 8-Hour MHFA Training

Recognition

Listen

Approach

Connect



The MHFA Training Framework

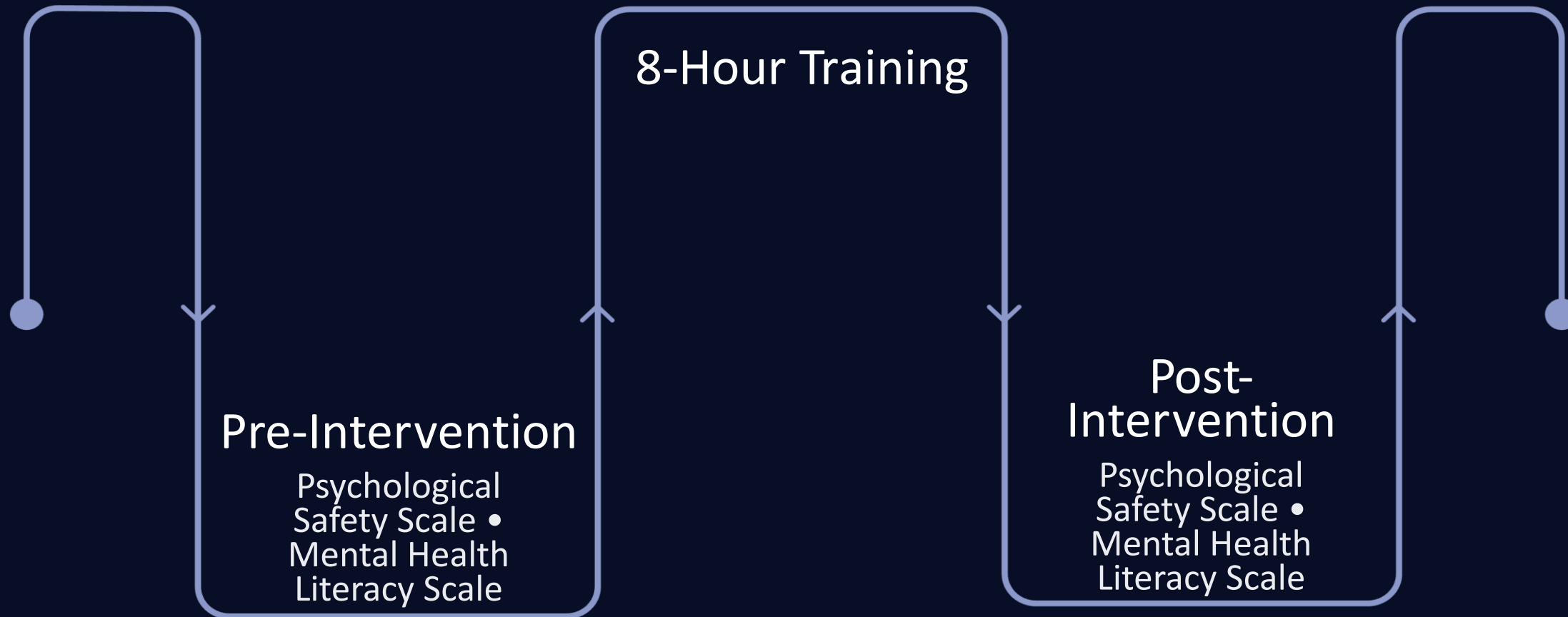
Core Components

- Recognizing signs of mental distress
- Initial help-seeking conversations
- Connecting to appropriate resources
- Reducing stigma and misconceptions
- Safety planning and crisis intervention

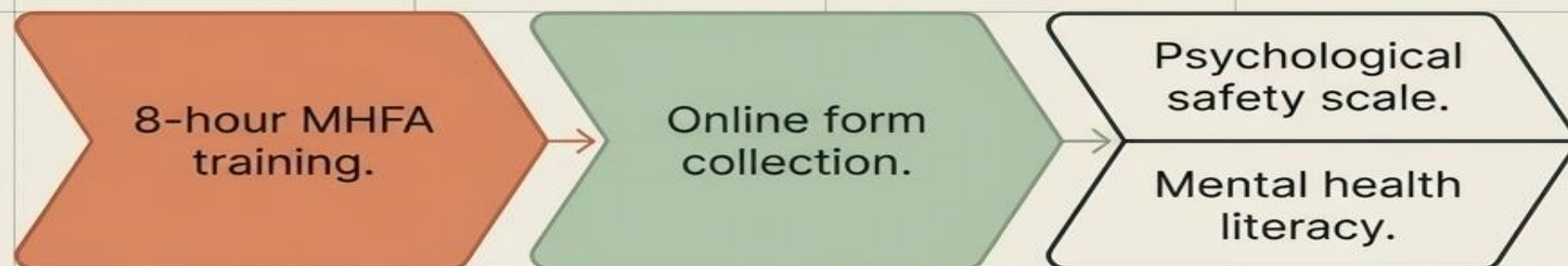


The evidence-based curriculum equips participants with practical skills to support colleagues and colleagues and students experiencing mental health challenges.

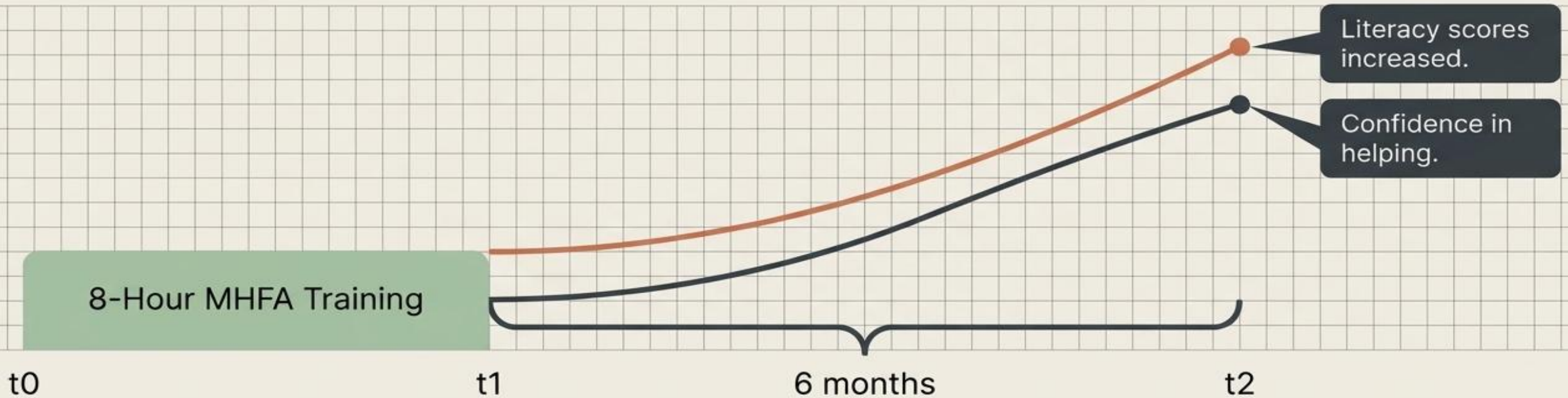
How We Measured Impact



Intervention & Measurement



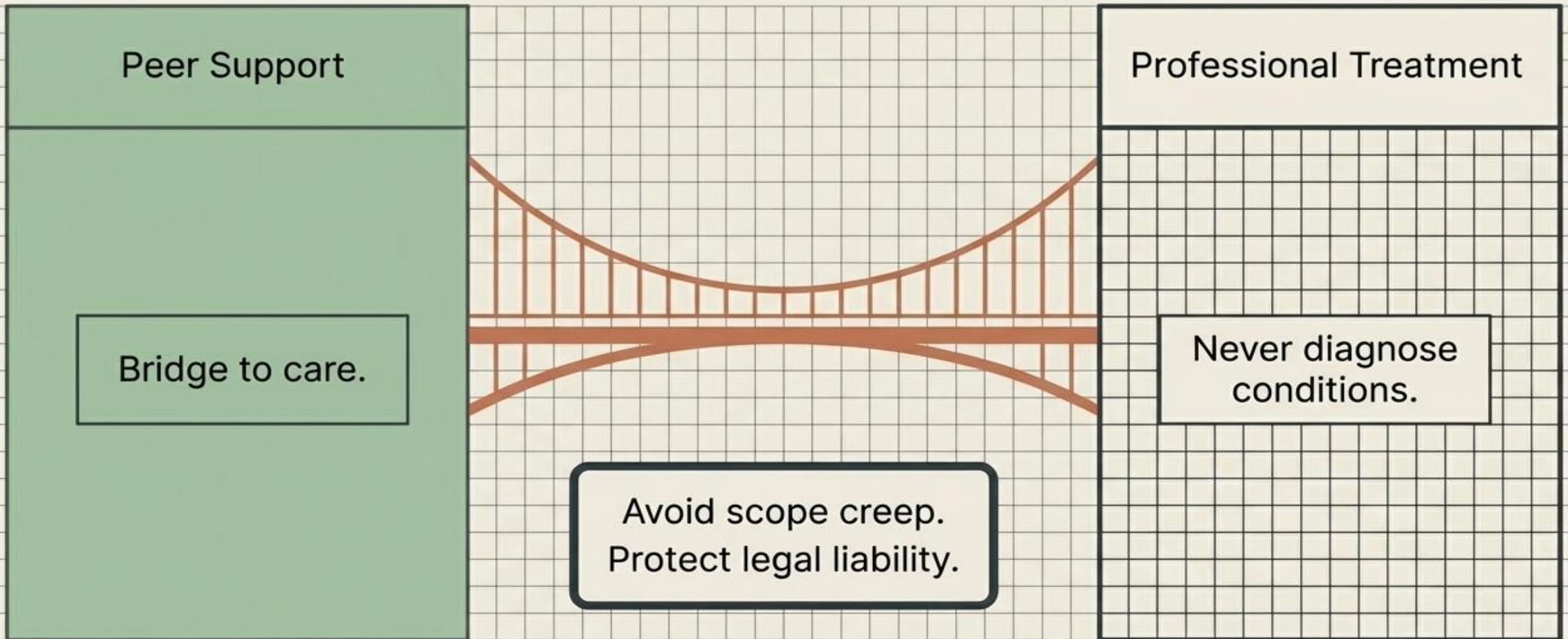
Validating the Intervention



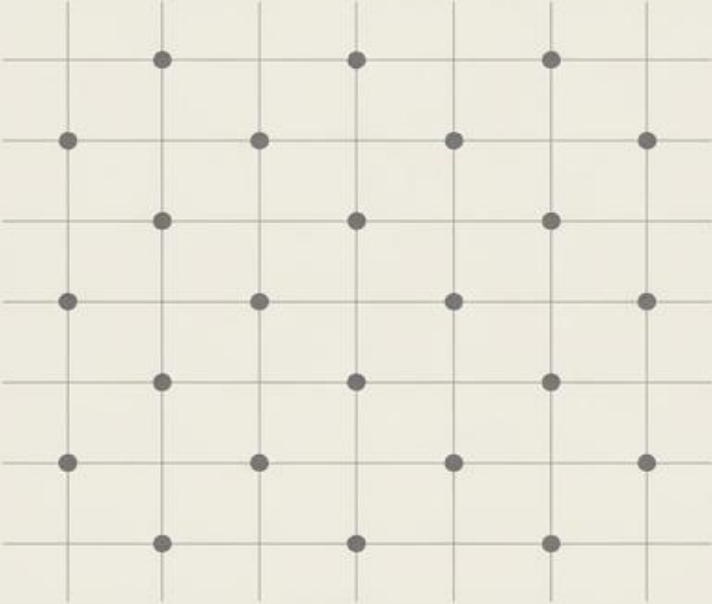
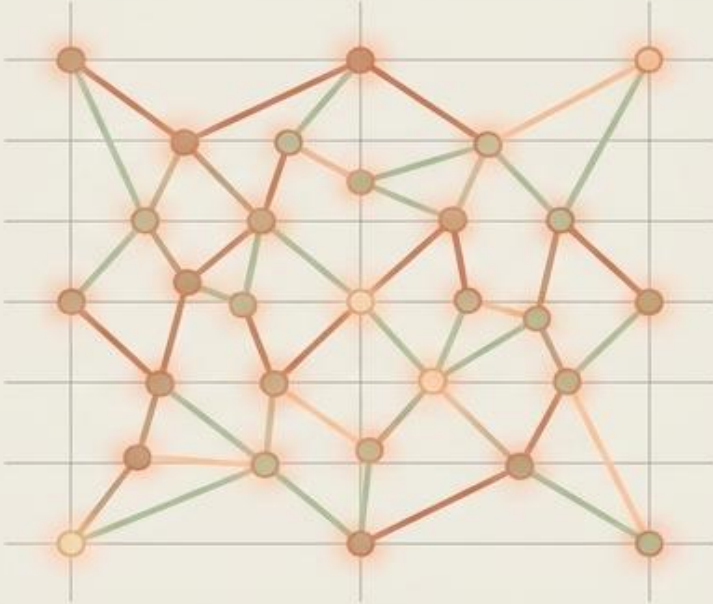
Stigma significantly reduced.

Sustained over time.

The Responder Boundary



Cultivating Psychological Safety

Isolated Workplace	Connected Culture
	
Reduces organizational vulnerability.	Creates resilient cultures.

Normalizes vulnerable conversations & cultivates psychological safety.

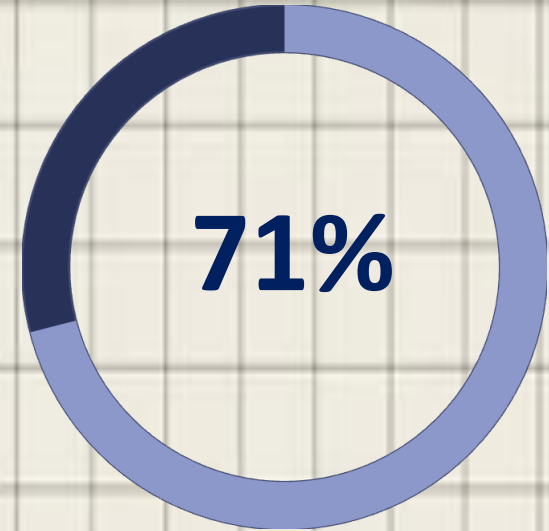


The Impact of MHFA Training on Training on Psychological Safety

5/7

Psychological
Safety Items
Improved

Significant increases across most
most measured dimensions



Highlighted



MHFA: Cultivating Psychological Safety

Mental Health First Aid training isn't just about crisis response; it's a foundational catalyst for building environments where everyone feels safe to speak, learn, and grow.

1 MHFA Training

Equipping individuals with essential skills and knowledge

2 Reduces Stigma

Fostering empathy and understanding in the community

3 Enhances Psychological Safety

Creating brave spaces for open dialogue and support



71% Improvement

5 out of 7 psychological safety dimensions showed significant growth.



Boosted Literacy

Participants reported increased mental health knowledge and awareness.



Greater Confidence

First Aiders felt more prepared and comfortable to intervene.

Our research unequivocally shows that MHFA training actively transforms workplaces and learning environments into pillars of psychological safety and support.

You Are The Architects

Occupational Health Nurses as Vital Engineers

As OHNs, you design and construct the infrastructure for psychological safety in your institutions. Your expertise and compassion create the blueprint for mental health support.

Building a Resilient Harbor

Your work transforms campuses into safe harbors where students and staff can weather challenges. Every intervention, every conversation, every moment of support builds institutional resilience.

Saving Careers and Lives

The skills you develop and share don't just improve outcomes—they prevent tragedies. Early intervention through MHFA training has measurable impact on retention, performance, and wellbeing.



Let's Build Together



Breaking Academic Stigma

How do we normalize mental health conversations in academic culture?

Institutional Barriers

What systemic challenges prevent implementation in your settings?

Implementation Strategies

How can we scale MHFA training across across departments and campuses?

Ongoing Support

What resources ensure sustainable impact impact beyond initial training?

"The question is not whether we can afford to invest in mental health first aid—it's whether we can afford not to."

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

Your dedication to psychologically safe environments is helping build a healthier, more resilient future.

Thank you for your partnership. Let's keep advancing mental health and creating supportive, brave spaces for everyone.

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