

My Mental Health First Aid Training

By: Harry C. Box

A new program can help you make a difference

Would I know what to do if a friend of mine, or a family member, or colleague was having a panic attack, or felt depressed or suicidal, or struggled with alcoholism? In my lifetime, I have known several people during a time of crisis in their lives. I imagine that is true for most people. We are generally ill-equipped for it. When Behind the Scenes, the industry charity, announced it would offer training covering how to interact with a person in crisis, I was immediately seized by the concept yet also trepidatious. First, there was the time commitment, something that I have in short supply these days. Then I dreaded that it would be a dull slog. I have an active imagination when it comes to foreseeing my own misery when I volunteer to do something like training. I know first-hand the challenge of delivering engaging, insightful, memorable training. When I later reflected on my journey, and the value of being in possession of this training, I thought I should share it. Here's what it was like.

In 2019, Behind the Scenes started to focus on a range of mental health issues. As described by executive director Lori Rubinstein, "As the worldwide conversation on mental health has grown, so too has the conversation within our industry. We are learning more about the dimensions of the problem and the depths of people's pain and despair, and the role that the unique stresses, demands, and culture of our industry play. The time has clearly come for all of us to take an active role in fighting the stigma associated with mental illness and to offer a helping hand to our colleagues who are struggling with issues such as anxiety, depression, harassment, or addic-

tion." Behind the Scenes has collaborated with other concerned industry and mental health organizations and individuals to provide a wide array of resources, one of which is mental health first aid training.

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Deciding to commit to this investment of time and money was a process for me. The training takes place in two parts, a two-to-four-hour self-paced online course—which took me a little over two hours—and a six-hour virtual live instructor-led session. The cost is \$125. Training Trust Fund reimbursement is available for IATSE members and signatories, and scholarships are available through the Chauvet Professional ReSet Fund.

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The concept of the training is that it is first aid. You are not being trained to be a psychiatrist. You would no more

attempt to give therapy to a suicidal friend than you would commence open-heart surgery if they happened to have a heart attack. But you would give them CPR if you were trained for it. You'd keep them alive and get them

to an ER. You would see them in recovery and let them know you care about them. As a friend, colleague, or family member the first aider is the first person on the scene, the first person who might recognize the signs and symptoms of a problem. From there, a first aider needs to know how to interact with a person in crisis, connect them with help, and follow through. There are pitfalls—for-example, things that may be natural enough to say but which are unhelpful and possibly destructive. The training provides a skill set and vocabulary to speak effectively with someone. It enables the first aider to be clearheaded as they process the situation and deliberate in their thoughts, words, and actions so they can avoid the pitfalls and steer towards shore.

The training experience

The online portion was frictionless. The instructional design follows all the best practices for good online training. It consisted of slides, narration, useful acronyms to help remember essential

steps, and interactive exercises to help cement the concepts in memory. The curriculum is based on an international program called Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). It was created in Australia in 2000, brought to the US in 2008, and is now in 24 countries. In the US, it is administered by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. Behind the Scenes' training uses industry-specific scenarios and references.

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This was in preparation for the live virtual training, which, for me, took place on a Sunday afternoon/evening. (A variety of days and times is available.) Five or six hours seems long for such a course, but the time went by quickly and it was well-spent. Our course facilitator was Bryan Huneycutt, of HuneyBadger Entertainment Consulting. Bryan has over 30 years of experience in the live event production industry with a focus on safety. He was program manager for entertainment safety for Disney Parks and Resorts Live Entertainment. He currently serves on the steering committee for the Behind the Scenes Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Initiative and as chair of the USITT Health and Safety Commission. Bryan was clearly experienced at guiding adult learning. He was respectful of everyone, clear and to the point, listened as much as he taught, had a sense of humor, and kept things moving. Being a veteran of the entertainment industry, he knows the stressors—the pace, anxiety, exhaustion, family tensions, and difficult personalities that seem to be part and parcel with working in this industry.

My fellow travelers turned out to be

mostly from the motion picture and television sectors. I had expected a larger number to be concert roadies and theatre techs, but we had two directors of photography, two camera operators, a costume designer, a set medic, and a guy in the military with a girlfriend in our industry. Bryan occasionally sent us into breakout groups to brainstorm on a problem, and so the participants got to know one

another over time. The variety of backgrounds and experiences contributed enormously to the discussion.

In the final hour or so, we watched a series of filmed scenarios, which provided a springboard for making observations and practicing the concepts we had learned. The quality of these vignettes was remarkable. The writing was subtle and realistic and the acting stunningly good. They had none of the cheese you might expect in a training video, and, notably, the cinematography was expertly crafted. I felt obligated to call this out to my classmates and we had a laugh about it. The Academy Award for best actor in a training film goes to the grandfather whose grief and loss threatens to overwhelm him. The quality vignettes brought the subject matter home, making it as real as you could hope to do in a classroom setting. It demonstrated the signals that could be easy to miss or misinterpret, and it modeled the value and the limits of the role of a first aider.

When the training was completed, I received certification as a Mental Health First Aider, valid for three years. Like CPR training, I'll need a refresher from time to time. Participants have

access to a participant guidebook, and the Behind the Scenes website has BeThe1To suicide prevention materials for review.

The day that I did the training, I had half a dozen other things that needed to be done. I had such pressing immediate pressures on my time that I almost backed out and would have forfeited my fee. I can only say that once I'd done the training, I felt the value of the training far outweighed anything else I may have accomplished with those hours. I wholeheartedly encourage industry members to take the opportunity to get this training. It could help you get through one of the most difficult and important events that life puts in your hands and could save the life of someone you love.

(For more information about this and other mental health programs, go to bsthelp.org/mentalhealth.)



*Harry C. Box has more than 20 years of experience in motion picture and television, specializing in cinematography, camera, and lighting. Harry is a member of the Cinematography Guild and the Society of Camera Operators and is the author of the highly regarded text *The Set Lighting Technician's Handbook* (now in its fourth edition). He serves as council manager for the *ESTA Production Equipment Rental Group*.*