



Mental Health Literacy Brief for Middle and High School Educators

Interlinking Mental Health Literacy and Social-Emotional Learning

Teaching Mental Health Literacy for Middle and High School Students

Mental Health Literacy (MHL) involves students' understanding of age-appropriate mental health concepts, recognition of mental health stigma, awareness of available resources, and development of effective coping strategies. MHL aims to create a supportive school environment where mental well-being is prioritized.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is broadly understood as a process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and life.

At the middle and high school level, MHL and SEL work hand-in-hand. MHL incorporates SEL competencies to increase students' knowledge of mental health symptoms, enhance their ability to seek help, and build language for mental health advocacy.

Integrating MHL with SEL: A Whole-Student Approach

Combining MHL with an SEL foundation nurtures students' emotional intelligence, mental well-being, and social skills. Teaching MHL strengthens SEL development in several ways:

- **Self-Awareness:** Expanding comprehension of mental health symptoms and challenges helps students recognize and process their own experiences with mental well-being. This increased awareness supports personal growth and emotional maturity.
- **Reduction of Stigma:** By expanding students' understanding of mental health fosters compassion and resilience. This awareness reduces shame, harassment, and increases acceptance of seeking help, building a more supportive school community.
- **Coping Strategies:** Students practice age-appropriate tools and techniques for managing difficult emotions, stress, and anxiety. These skills enhance protective factors, enabling students to maintain mental well-being and academic success.
- **Improved Academic Performance:** Mental health is closely linked to academic success. Students who understand and manage their mental health tend to be more focused, engaged, and able to achieve academic goals.
- **Social Skills Development:** Understanding mental health challenges helps students build empathy and strengthen relationships. By becoming more aware of the diverse experiences of peers, students feel more comfortable supporting each other.

A Call to Action

SEL builds a foundation for connection across cultural differences, encouraging individuality, respect, and support. MHL strengthens this foundation by opening a dialogue where students can reflect on their individual experiences with mental health and well-being. MHL is not meant to diagnose or replace needed services but rather to engage students and support early identification of mental health needs. Together, we can create a school environment where students are not only academically prepared but also mentally and emotionally equipped to succeed.



Benefits and Outcomes:

- Improved mental health literacy among students, with a greater ability to identify, understand, and manage mental health issues.
- Enhanced SEL competencies, leading to better interpersonal skills, academic engagement, and overall well-being.
- A school culture that values mental health, respect, and empathy, creating an inclusive, supportive environment for all students.

Educators report that MHL curriculum:

- Heightens awareness of students' mental health challenges, equipping them with strategies to connect students to resources.
- Provides a space for teachers to discuss mental health openly, often leading to more comfort and connection in the classroom.

Students reflect that MHL instruction:

- Made them feel "validated and seen" and deepened their understanding of peers' mental health experiences.
- Encouraged more supportive and compassionate behaviors, validating differing opinions and increasing acceptance of diverse perspectives



The role of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

MHL is a tier 1 intervention, it acts as a preventative and early identification measure to provide each student with education and ability to manage mental health challenges as they occur.

When MHL is used alongside multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), it is highly effective in fostering early intervention and preventing the escalation of concerns. Embedding MHL into the school day for all students reduces the prevalence and severity of mental health challenges, allowing providers to focus on urgent individual needs and strengthening schools' ability to respond at advanced support levels.

It aims to strengthen student resilience and support systems, ultimately reducing the burden on resources and enhancing the capacity to meet student needs.



Resources

- [OSPI SEL](#) Webpage offers a breakdown of SEL in WA state, implementation resources, professional development and additional resources.
- [Mental Health Instruction Library](#) offers a comprehensive list evidence-based resources, developed by Chad's Legacy and UW SMART Center.
- [CASEL School Guide](#) & [Mental Health Literacy](#) evidenced-based content for SEL and MHL school implementation.
- [CDC](#) offers resources and information on mental health stigma.
- [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) has education resources for information on mental health topics, including lesson plans and activities.
- [Oregon Department of Education](#) offers extensive information on integrating mental and overall health services in schools.
- [Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) has education resources on mental health comprehension, and common mental health challenges and disorders.
- [Youth.gov](#) offers information on mental health promotion and prevention.
- [ACT for Youth](#) provides resources for response and prevention for mental health stressors.

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