

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY GUIDANCE

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GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

Educators, school counselors, student assistance professionals and students themselves in Washington State agree that Mental Health Literacy (MHL) is essential for success in learning, relationships and life. Although not all educators need the same professional learning, all staff can use this information to create a school environment that continues a common vision and language for student social emotional development and gain knowledge and skills that support students' mental health and well-being. Developed by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), this document is designed for any educator, school counselor or student assistance professional to build a foundation for MHL and use its content to bring more awareness to mental health challenges, reduce stigma in the community, and promote mental well-being and prioritize when to seek help. This content was developed for its ease of use and in alignment with health education standards, as well as with national resources aimed at increasing mental health literacy in the classroom.

What is Included in the Guidance Document?

This document was developed to guide the facilitator through the Mental Health Literacy (MHL) framework, which will help the facilitator create an environment that is conducive to active engagement, peer connection and whole student learning. The guidance document includes the following sections:

- An overview of the content covered in the Washington MHL learning units and lesson plans.
- A discussion on how to use the guidance document and plan for classroom implementation.
- Key considerations for delivering MHL lessons in the classroom, and ways to navigate this topic respectfully and safely.
- A segment-by-segment breakdown of the Washington MHL Learning Units.

What is Mental Health Literacy?

Mental Health Literacy (MHL) involves students' understanding of age-appropriate mental health concepts and challenges, awareness of how stigma impacts mental health, direction for available resources, and develop resilience through coping strategies and healthy routines. It aims to create a supportive school environment where mental well-being is recognized as a critical component of education. The purpose of this instruction is to increase mental health competency for K—12 students using a whole child strength-based approach. It is education for promoting positive mental health and strengthening the social emotional climate for students and educators.

Mental well-being is closely linked to social emotional learning (SEL). Research shows that students with positive mental health can regulate their emotions, cope with stressors, and demonstrate behavioral management skills. They also feel more connected to their school, do better academically, show more prosocial behaviors, and schools report less bullying and harassment in school. The outcome for improved student success demonstrates that student mental health is essential and should be integrated into health education.

Key Points to Remember

This content is designed as a Tier 1 universal approach, with suggested modifications included to help accommodate most students while maintaining core learning objectives. While these modifications support accessibility, they do not replace the core learning objectives. For students who may require alternative learning strategies, it remains essential to consult with school staff for additional guidance and support. Educators play a key role in delivering these lessons and standards, while also fostering a supportive, safe, and inclusive classroom environment where effective learning can thrive. In teaching this content, educators are encouraged to support students in prioritizing their mental well-being, helping them build critical skills and knowledge that positively impact their mental health. While mental health literacy is not intended to turn educators into mental health counselors, it equips them to provide foundational support and guide students in navigating mental health challenges. For students who may require additional or alternative learning approaches, collaboration with school staff remains essential. Open communication between educators, school administrators, and families is expected and encouraged to ensure that all students' needs are effectively met.

Mental Health Literacy (MHL) is about helping both students and teachers build skills for mental health and wellness. It is based on strength-based, trauma-informed, equity-focused, and social-emotional learning principles.

Classroom discussions use respectful language and address bias, to avoid unintentionally adding to the stigma around mental health.

This content is designed as a **Tier 1 universal approach**, meaning it's for all students. Some activities have suggested modifications to meet most students' needs, but these do not replace the main learning goals. If a student needs different approaches, teachers should work with school staff for extra guidance.

Strong communication between teachers, school leaders, and families is encouraged to support every student's needs. Educators are not expected to become mental health counselors, but MHL equips them to:

- Foster a safe, supportive, and inclusive classroom
- Help students understand their mental health needs
- Teach coping strategies
- Address the impact of stigma

Most importantly, MHL is **not** for diagnosing or replacing professional help. It's about giving students the tools to care for their mental health and create a school environment where they are ready to succeed both academically and emotionally.

HOW TO USE THE GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

Purpose and the Whole-Child Initiative

Mental health encompasses emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral functioning. It exists within a continuum of care that includes whole-child health and well-being: physical and emotional safety, school connection, community and family identity, equity and purpose. Mental well-being is important for student learning, equally essential is creating conditions for students to thrive. A dedicated instruction for students on mental health literacy is the essential next step to social emotional development.

Instruction for MHL with lesson plans are readily available on the OSPI [Mental Health Literacy](#) webpage, facilitators are encouraged to refer to this guide when preparing to review lesson plans and implement them. These lesson plans align with the newly updated health education standards and with the [Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\) adopted standards and benchmarks](#). The purpose is to help students learn how to access resources, advocate for themselves and others, and begin to embrace mental health as a critical aspect of their lives. Through teaching MHL lessons, facilitators will establish a supportive and compassionate classroom environment. Facilitators will use the MHL learning objectives to empower students with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate their mental health journey and support others along the way.

Learning Objectives and Lesson Plan Overview

The MHL lessons align with SEL and newly updated health education standards. MHL aims to develop skills and knowledge that enhance mental health and well-being. The focus will be on these main objectives:

- Develop a competency for mental health disorders and challenges to identify responsible personal health behaviors.
- Demonstrate health-promoting practices through an understanding for cultural equity, diversity and general stigma reducing behaviors.
- Demonstrate self-awareness for mental health distress and symptoms to seek care and prevent further health risks.

The following four learning units are core elements of Mental Health Literacy:

1. Mental Health Competency
2. Mental Health Promotion
3. Mental Health Stigma
4. Mental Health Advocacy and Seeking Help

The learning units are universally inclusive, research informed, sustainable and simple to follow so that the content can be integrated effectively.

Preparing to Implement the Lessons in the Classroom

SEL is an important framework because of how it interlinks with MHL and its foundational practices. SEL is integrated within each MHL learning unit. Each of the teaching practices below will play a vital role in promoting both SEL and MHL by creating a supportive, engaging, and empowering learning environment:

Student-centered learning – This approach encourages strength-based decision making to allow

students a choice in how to support their mental well-being, by helping them understand their emotions and develop coping strategies when they feel stressed or overwhelmed.

Teacher language – By avoiding stigmatizing terms, biased actions and language; teachers create a space to empower students and focus on growth-oriented feedback for discussing mental health topics openly.

Cooperative learning – Shared activities can encourage open dialogue, allowing students to practice empathy and support each other's mental health needs, which may reduce feelings of isolation and omit shame.

Balanced instruction – UDL instructional methods allow students to explore mental health topics in various ways (visual, auditory, experiential), making learning accessible and suits their learning styles.

Competence building – Competency in mental health literacy involves teachers developing a competency and capacity to empower students to explore mental health topics with respect, empathy, and confidence.

Family Engagement – Keeping families informed about what their children are learning helps reinforce the value and impact of mental health literacy lessons.

Considerations for Mental Health Literacy in the Classroom

1. Create a Safe and Supportive Environment

- Begin with establishing community agreements around respect and confidentiality. Use this and other cooperative activities to model empathy and active listening, to build trust and show students the classroom is a safe space.

2. Encourage Open and Honest Conversations

- Invite students to share their thoughts and remember healthy boundaries around sharing. Use "I" statements to model appropriate self-disclosure if it helps contextualize the topic. Remind students of mandatory reporting policies at school; be mindful about the personal details shared in the classroom.

3. Recognize the Importance of Self-Awareness and Self-Reflection

- Encourage students to regularly check in with their emotions and emphasize that self-awareness is key to knowing when to seek help and take action for their well-being.

4. Prepare for Emotional Responses

- Be mindful that discussing mental health can trigger emotional responses in students, particularly those who have experienced trauma or mental health challenges. Offer them an option to step out or take a break if they feel overwhelmed. Another good practice is to invite a counselor to help support the classroom during these lessons.

5. Be Transparent About Boundaries and Discretion

- Clarify the limits of confidentiality prior to beginning the lessons. Express the importance of keeping the conversation in the classroom, but if a student discloses personal information, **follow school policies** on mandatory reporting and ensure students understand that certain disclosures will be shared to keep them safe.

6. Provide Resources and Encourage Follow-Up

- Make students aware of available mental health resources, such as counselors, hotlines, or online support platforms. End each lesson with a brief recap and encourage students to reach out if they have further thoughts or concerns.

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

LEARNING UNITS

MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY

This section will increase awareness of the common mental health conditions and challenges that students may experience. This is not an exhaustive list, these mental health conditions and challenges may occur based on a variety of factors. Having awareness and identifying symptoms does not mean the student is experiencing a mental health disorder. Encourage students to use this awareness to feel more comfortable supporting their peers or seeking additional help.

During preparation, please review the considerations on [page \[6\]](#) to increase comfort for delivering the lesson plan.

Understanding Mental Health Disorders and Challenges

MHL teaches students to identify risk factors and develop skills that build protective factors to minimize the impact of stressors on mental well-being. Students gain an awareness of common mental health challenges faced by youth, which this awareness helps reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behavior.

Protective Factors help individuals cope with mental health challenges, which may include maintaining family relationships and social connections, goalsetting, problem-solving skills, using coping strategies, and accessing health services.

Risk Factors are conditions that may increase vulnerability to mental health challenges, such as family history of mental illness, poverty, substance misuse, childhood trauma, and being a victim from discrimination.

Common Mental Health Challenges and Signs/Symptoms

Anxiety

Occasional anxiety in response to stress is normal and often fades. Anxiety disorders, however, involve persistent and worsening anxiety that doesn't subside over time.

Signs & Symptoms: Persistent worry, rapid heartbeat, sweating, shaking, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, irritability.

Impact: Social isolation, avoidance of situations, impaired daily functioning.

Depression

Depression is a brain disorder that goes beyond feeling 'down' for a few days. Many people struggle silently, fearing the stigma of mental illness. With early and consistent treatment, individuals can manage symptoms, feel better, and enjoy life again.

Signs & Symptoms: Feelings of sadness or emptiness, loss of interest in activities, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, sleep and appetite changes, thoughts of death or suicide.

Impact: Can lead to social withdrawal, academic decline, and difficulties in relationships.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD involves difficulty focusing, hyperactivity, impulsivity, or a combination of these. For a

diagnosis, these symptoms must be outside the typical range for a person's age and development. Signs & Symptoms: Difficulty staying focused, forgetfulness, disorganization, impulsivity, restlessness.

Impact: Trouble in school, strained relationships, low self-esteem.

Substance use disorders

Mental health challenges can lead some to misuse substances as self-medication, substances can also trigger mental health symptoms and suicidal thoughts in people with addiction. Mental health and substance use disorders often share causes, such as brain changes, genetic factors, and early exposure to stress or trauma.

Signs & Symptoms: Increased substance use, cravings, withdrawal symptoms, neglecting responsibilities, mood swings, suicidal ideation, trouble at school or work.

Impact: Impaired academic performance, risky behavior, strained family relationships.

Screen Addictions and Internet Use Disorders

Screen addiction involves a compulsive need to use electronic devices despite negative impacts on daily life, such as work, school, and relationships. Internet use disorders, increasingly concerning today, are marked by excessive, compulsive online activity, often involving social media, gaming, gambling, problematic pornography use, and other digital platforms.

Signs & Symptoms: Obsessive checking of devices, inability to limit screen time, neglecting school or relationships, difficulty with offline interactions.

Prevalence: Rising concern among adolescents with increased digital connectivity.

Impact: Social isolation, academic decline, physical health issues (e.g., poor sleep, sedentary lifestyle).

Mental Health Promotion

Empower students to enhance their overall well-being, build resilience, and prevent mental health challenges. This section focuses on fostering positive mental health rather than solely focusing on mental health challenges. It integrates these elements into everyday life, helping individuals thrive while addressing potential challenges proactively.

During preparation, please review the considerations on [page \[6\]](#) to increase comfort for delivering the lesson plan.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Foster self-awareness by understanding one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Practices include mindfulness exercises, journaling, and self-reflection.

Practice thought reframe by learning to change negative thinking patterns and replace them with more positive, balanced thoughts.

Regulate Emotions by using techniques like deep breathing, grounding exercises, and self-affirmation to manage emotional reactions.

Develop healthy coping skills by engaging in activities like physical exercise, creative expression (art, music), relaxation techniques (yoga, meditation), and social support to manage stress.

Build resilience by fostering a growth mindset, maintaining hope in the face of challenges, and learning to navigate adversity in healthy ways.

Enhance advocacy by encouraging students to express their mental health needs, ask for help when needed, and set personal boundaries.

WAYS TO MAINTAIN MENTAL HEALTH

Daily Routines: Establishing routines such as exercise, healthy eating, and sleep hygiene.

Goal setting: Breaking down long-term goals into manageable steps, setting realistic expectations, and celebrating small victories.

Develop Skills: Teaching strategies such as self-awareness, cognitive reasoning, healthy coping skills, and emotion regulation helps students manage stress and maintain mental health.

Strengthen Relationships: Emphasis on relationship skills, self-advocacy, and setting personal goals contributes to a supportive social environment.

Awareness: Practicing mindful habits such as focusing on the present moment, avoiding overthinking, and engaging in relaxation techniques.

Connection to Culture: Encouraging students to explore their cultural identities and connect with community, fostering a sense of belonging.

Connection to Religion: Building a sense of belonging and community may be attained by some students who may want to explore their religious identities.

Support Systems: Building and maintaining relationships with family, friends, mentors, and community groups for emotional support.

MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Educating students on stigma helps them understand that mental health challenges do not define a person. Recognizing and talking about the impacts of stigma on mental health helps promote a more supportive, inclusive and accepting environment for students.

Although mental health awareness has increased, many individuals and communities, including students and families, still hold negative beliefs about those with mental health conditions. And that, stigmatizing someone by their illness rather than seeing them as a person hinders support. Recognizing students' needs beyond behavior promotes their success and well-being.

During preparation, please review the considerations on [page \[6\]](#) to increase comfort for delivering the lesson plan.

Defining and Recognizing Stigma

Stigma refers to negative attitudes and stereotypes around mental health conditions. It can appear as systemic stigma (laws/policies), public stigma (societal attitudes), or self-stigma (internalized beliefs).

Types of Stigmas:

- **Public Stigma** is negative societal attitudes about people with mental health conditions.
- **Systemic Stigma** are laws or policies that limit the rights of people with mental health conditions.
- **Self-stigma** is internalized shame or self-blame by individuals living with mental health conditions.

DECREASING STIGMA THROUGH EMPATHY AND AWARENESS

Empathy and Challenging Biases: Teach students to have empathy for individuals experiencing mental health issues. Encourage students to challenge their own stigmatizing beliefs and foster a supportive community.

Understand Social Impact: Social behaviors, such as bullying or discrimination, can negatively affect mental health. By recognizing these effects, students learn the importance of inclusive behaviors and supporting peers.

Cultural Awareness: Explore how society and culture shape mental health perceptions. Teach students about historical injustices that affect mental health among different populations builds understanding and acceptance.

SOCIAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

While recognizing that cultural influences do not define every individual, it is important to take this awareness to reduce the stigma around mental health challenges and provide mental health education and resources to those with limited support outside of the classroom.

Beliefs about Mental Health and Illness: In some cultures, mental health challenges may be perceived as weaknesses, moral failings, or even spiritual concerns rather than health issues. This view can lead people to hide their struggles, fear judgment and have resistance to clinical treatment or other mental health resources.

Privacy and Family Reputation: In some cultures, protecting family reputation can be a priority, leading families to discourage talking about mental health issues to avoid bringing “shame” or “inadequacy.”

Language and Terminology: Some languages lack neutral or precise terms for mental health conditions, which can contribute to stigmatization. When only negative or extreme words are available, it can reinforce misunderstandings and fear around mental health.

Perceptions of Treatment and Therapy: Some may hold beliefs that therapy or counseling is not for them. There may also be misunderstandings regarding available services. This can discourage individuals from seeking preventative or supportive mental health care.

Creating Moments for Open Conversations

Encourage Dialogue: MHL instruction promotes discussions about student thoughts on mental health challenges. Students learn that sharing is a sign of strength and can support peers by listening, responding calmly, and offering reassurance.

Identifying important aspects about conversations on mental health challenges and ensuring an environment that is supportive, non-judgmental and prepared for emotional dialogue.

How to navigate conversations about mental well-being:

- Acknowledge sharing as a sign of strength
- Listen and react non-judgmentally

- Respond in a calm and reassuring manner
- Reflect the feelings, strengths, and ideas when listening
- Ask how to be helpful and respond within capacity
- Help connect to other services and supports

Mental Health Advocacy and Seeking Help

To empower students to support their own mental well-being and ensure they know how to access resources and care when needed. Educating on advocacy and seeking help will normalize mental health conversations and promote early intervention.

During preparation, please review the considerations on [page \[6\]](#) to increase comfort for delivering the lesson plan.

EDUCATOR ROLE TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

The role of the educator is to teach the lessons/standards and to create a supportive, safe, and inclusive classroom environment where the most effective learning can happen. In teaching these lessons, educators can encourage and support students to prioritize their mental well-being. This enables students to gain critical skills and information that will positively impact on their mental health and well-being. Mental health literacy is not meant to have educators become mental health counselors; it is meant to provide foundational skills to help students navigate needs for mental health challenges.

If a student discloses a mental health challenge and if there is concern for potential harm, please follow school policy on reporting, and which may include these guidelines to help an educator navigate this moment:

Assess Risk and Follow Protocols

Identify any signs of immediate danger. Follow school protocols for emergencies, especially those involving suicide or self-harm.

Identify the Role

It's not expected to diagnose or gather detailed information. The educator's role is to assess the situation and connect the student with appropriate support.

Make a Referral

Refer the student to a school counselor, mental health counselor, or another designated student support staff member.

Provide Non-Emergency Support

If it's not urgent, encourage the student to access available school support or refer them to local resources using the school's resource sheet.

HOW AND WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Knowing how and when to seek help is important to addressing mental health challenges at the right time. It is important to remind students that any person may experience mental health challenges, some more than others, so having awareness can increase the individual's access and ability to seek help when needed. Please note that if experiencing persistent symptoms like sadness, anger, irritability, or feelings of being overwhelmed, it is encouraged to seek follow up support.

Knowing How to Seek Help

To support mental health challenges, seeking help is a primary action to take. There are many supports at school and in communities; it is important to learn the role of each support at school and in the community.

Types of Support:

- **School Support:** School counselors, social workers, and mental health staff can provide on-campus support
- **Peer and Adult Networks:** Connecting with peers, family members, or community who can offer guidance and support
- **After-School Programs:** such as the Boys & Girls Club and the YMCA—offer structured after-school programs such as sports/fitness activities, mentorship programs, health and wellness education, and homework help
- **Primary Care Providers:** Seeking referrals to mental health professionals through a doctor, for a holistic approach to care
- **Knowing When to Seek Help:** Recognizing when mental health challenges become overwhelming (e.g., persistent sadness, difficulty coping, sleep and food intake disturbances, reduced daily functioning) is a primary factor
- **Therapy:** Speaking to a licensed counselor or therapist can help manage stress and process emotions

Considerations for Seeking Help:

- **Effective help-seeking:** Utilize school resources like counselors, social workers, or mental health professionals.
- **Accessing therapy:** Through primary care providers, school counselors, or community services, with considerations for cultural and religious preferences.
- **Encouraging Empowerment and Autonomy:** Encourage respect for cultural approaches and emphasize working alongside communities to blend traditional and modern mental health practices in ways that resonate with them.

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Download this material in PDF at [Mental Health Literacy](#). This material is available in alternative format upon request. Contact the Front Desk at 360-725-6000.

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