



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

# RESOURCE

## Entry Points into Mental Health Literacy: Aligning to Social and Emotional Learning

### What is Mental Health Literacy?

Everyone has health and mental health; managing health is part of everyday life. People make many health decisions every day, like what to eat, when to exercise, to take medications as prescribed, to engage in preventative care, among others. At some point in their lives, every person will need to know how to access and use information and services to address a health or mental health concern. A person's ability to do this is impacted by their health literacy.



**Health literacy** is how well a person can find, understand, and use information and services when making decisions about and taking action to support their health and the health of others. (CDC 2023)

**Mental health literacy** is an aspect of health literacy that contains four components:



### 1. Mental Health Knowledge

A basic understanding of how healthy minds and bodies function, what impacts mental health, how mental health changes over time, signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, and common treatments.

For educators, this includes knowledge of the prevalence and impact of chronic stress, marginalization, and trauma on student's development, how mental health impacts classroom behavior and learning, and how student mental health challenges show up at school.



### 2. Ability To Build and Maintain Positive Mental Health

Skills to identify activities and habits that are personally helpful for promoting well-being, consistently doing those activities, and building those habits. It also includes the ability to assess personal well-being and take action to maintain positive mental health.

For educators, this includes understanding compassion fatigue and using strategies to promote compassion resilience in themselves and colleagues, implementing policies, programs, and practices that encourage the social, emotional, and behavioral health and well-being of students before they are at risk for developing a mental health challenge.



### 3. Ability To Seek Help and Provide Support

The ability to communicate about mental health concerns to trusted individuals, identify and connect to community mental health resources, and use self-help strategies when needed. This also includes skills to support others in seeking help.

For educators, this includes knowledge of the school mental health referral pathway and how to center student and family voice and choice when identifying and referring students to supports, how to implement trauma-sensitive classroom approaches that support students experiencing a mental health challenge, reinforce skills that students learn in therapy in the classroom, and build caring relationships and safe classroom environments.



### 4. Mental Health Stigma Reduction

Knowledge of the types of mental health stigma and the impact of mental health stigma, willingness to speak openly about mental health, the ability to identify and use strategies to reduce stigmatizing attitudes, language, and actions, and reflect on how cultural norms, experiences, and exposure to people with mental health

challenges has shaped a person's beliefs about mental health.

For educators, this includes treating students who have experienced a mental health challenge as strong and capable, creating opportunities for students to speak openly about mental health and share stories of recovery and resilience, and using person-first language when talking about students' mental health challenges.

## What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?



**Social and Emotional learning (SEL)** is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

This definition identifies SEL as a two-part process: acquisition and application. Simply acquiring a skill does not guarantee it will be used at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner. Explicit teaching and continual rehearsal of these skills, across environments, allow students the opportunity to apply what they have learned. Social and emotional learning does not mean simply following a curriculum.

A comprehensive approach to SEL, in which all staff, in collaboration with families, are implementing, rehearsing, modeling, and providing feedback, will create the environment needed for students to apply and generalize these skills.

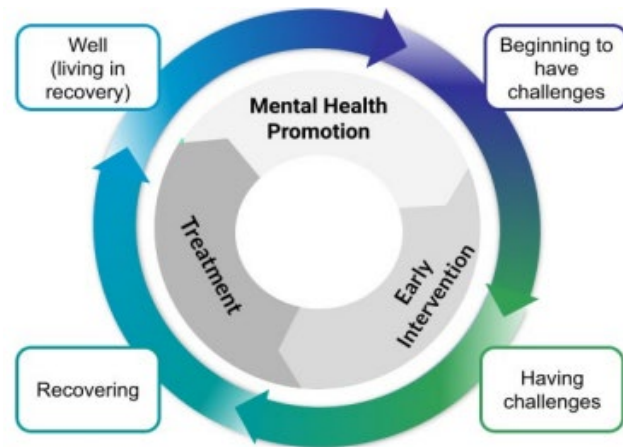
The [Wisconsin's Social and Emotional Learning Competencies](#) and [Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards](#) outline three SEL domains:

1. **Emotional Development:** Emotional development is a complex process, involving a range and intensity of emotional reactions, perception of emotions in self and others, emotional self-regulation, and behavioral expressions of emotions. Emotional development occurs through the interactions of a student's temperament in the context of relationship and experience.
2. **Self Concept:** A student's developing awareness of self in relation to others, sense of well-being, and trust that they have a right to a place in the world. Students depend upon their interactions with adults and peers to construct a sense of self.
3. **Social Competence:** The ability to achieve personal goals in social interactions while maintaining positive relationships with others. Social competence is a culturally determined construct that includes the self-regulation needed to succeed in social settings. (DPI 2018)

## How Do Mental Health Literacy and SEL Fit into the Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework?

In Wisconsin, schools promote student and staff mental health and well-being using the [Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework](#). This framework outlines a vision for well-being in Wisconsin schools using six components of high quality school mental health systems. A central component of this framework is a full continuum of mental health promotion, early intervention, and treatment supports that proactively provide culturally responsive mental health services to all students. (DPI 2021) *Figure 1 shows the continuum of mental health supports in schools.*

Figure 1: Continuum of Mental Health Supports



The continuum of supports is anchored in strong universal mental health promotion policies and practices, which provide a robust foundation of positive mental health for all students and staff. Universal mental health promotion activities proactively promote developmental, academic, behavioral, social, and emotional well-being for all students, including those at risk for or experiencing a mental health challenge. (NCSMH 2020)

Mental health promotion activities are implemented across whole districts, schools, classrooms, grade levels, and school-sponsored programs. When schools provide a strong universal level of mental health promotion policies and practices, the need for early intervention and treatment supports is reduced. Mental health literacy education for students and staff and social and emotional learning are both key aspects of mental health promotion, as they both encourage the development of knowledge and skills that help students and staff live healthy lives.

## How Does Social and Emotional Learning Provide a Foundation for Mental Health Literacy?

High levels of social and emotional competence provide students and staff with a strong foundation of knowledge and skills required for mental health literacy. Although Social and Emotional Learning and mental health literacy are different things, schools can leverage their existing SEL work to strengthen mental health literacy in students and staff.

*Table 1 outlines each of the Wisconsin SEL domains and competencies and a description of the specific components of mental health literacy they impact.*

Table 1: Crosswalk of SEL Competencies and Components of Mental Health Literacy

Wisconsin SEL Domains	Competencies Associated with the SEL Domain	Component(s) of Mental Health Literacy Each SEL Competency Supports
<b>Emotional Development</b>	Ability to understand and manage one’s emotions.	<p>The ability to understand and manage one’s emotions helps people <b>build and maintain positive mental health</b> by providing them with skills to regulate their response to and cope with internal and external stressors. This positively impacts quality of life and reduces symptoms of mental health challenges. (Menefee et al. 2022)</p> <p>It also contributes to a person’s <b>ability to seek help</b> when they may be struggling. People who are skilled at understanding and managing their emotions are more likely to seek help from professional and non-professional sources than those with lower levels of emotional competence. (Ciarrochi and Deane 2001)</p>
<b>Self Concept</b>	Ability to develop positive identity and recognize self as a lifelong learner.	<p>The ability to develop positive identity helps people <b>build and maintain positive mental health</b> by increasing their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities and choices. This promotes healthy relationships, equips people to bounce back from challenges, and helps people focus on their positive qualities. (Mann et al. 2004)</p> <p>High self-esteem and self-efficacy can also contribute to <b>stigma reduction</b> by reducing the effects of self-stigma on a person who is experiencing a mental health challenge. (Corrigan and Rao 2012)</p>

Wisconsin SEL Domains	Competencies Associated with the SEL Domain	Component(s) of Mental Health Literacy Each SEL Competency Supports
		<p>It also contributes to a person’s <b>ability to seek help</b> because positive self-identity increases a person’s belief that they can navigate challenges, counteracts the stigma associated with seeking help, and fosters a sense of belonging in a community where people feel comfortable to ask for help.</p>
<p><b>Social Competence</b></p>	<p>Ability to establish and maintain positive relationships by respecting others, practicing social skills, and making responsible choices while recognizing and connecting to the community at large.</p>	<p>The ability to establish and maintain positive relationships helps people <b>build and maintain positive mental health</b> by increasing social support and sense of purpose, reducing stress, and improving emotional resilience and coping skills. (Umberson and Montez 2020)</p> <p>Positive relationships also contribute to a person’s <b>ability to seek help</b> when they are struggling with their mental health because they can be a source of validation and empathy, reduce concerns associated with asking for help, and make it more comfortable to disclose details of a mental health challenge. Having positive relationships with a variety of people can also increase the likelihood that a person will have contact with and hear the story of someone who has experienced a mental health challenge, which is a research-backed strategy for <b>reducing stigma</b>. (Corrigan et al. 2012)</p>

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What programs, practices, resources and supports currently exist in our district to promote SEL and mental health literacy? Who do they serve? Who is not being served? What gaps exist?
2. How can we communicate about the connections between SEL and mental health literacy to students, staff, and caregivers?
3. How can we increase opportunities for students to proactively practice SEL skills that also support mental health literacy?
4. How can we increase staff SEL competence and mental health literacy to increase equitable outcomes for students?

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Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
Student Services/Prevention & Wellness Team  
Liz Krubsack, School Mental Health Consultant  
201 West Washington Avenue  
Madison, WI 53703  
(608) 264-6719  
Elizabeth.krubsack@dpi.wi.gov  
<https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health>

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