



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

RESOURCE

Entry Points into Mental Health Literacy: Aligning to Trauma Sensitive Schools

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 a Trauma Sensitive School (TSS)?

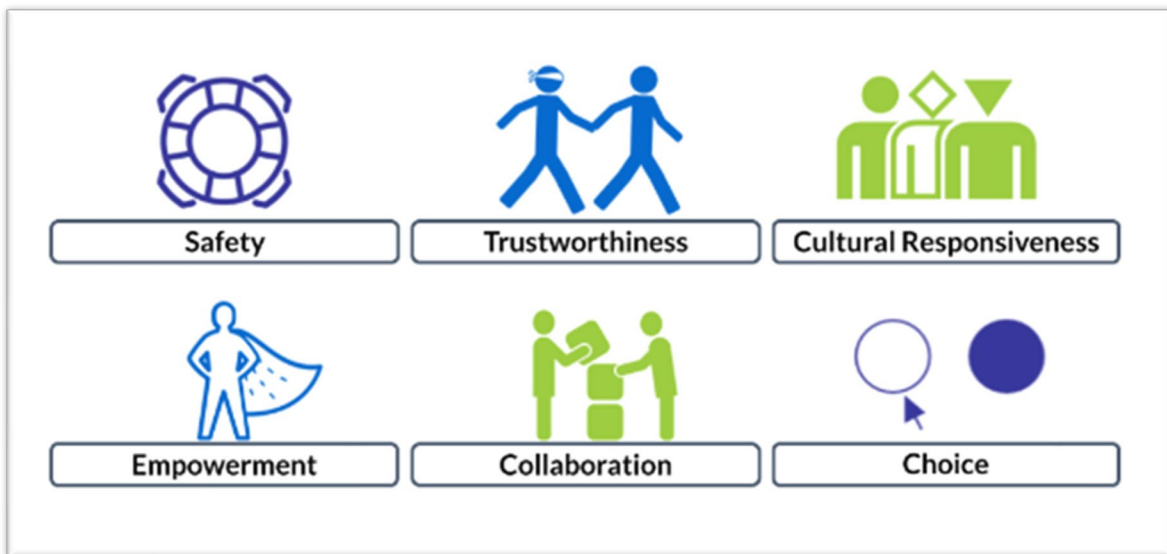
A trauma-sensitive school (TSS) is one that integrates the **guiding principles of safety, trustworthiness, cultural responsiveness, empowerment, collaboration, and choice** into every facet of its operation, from daily interactions to school-wide policies and systems. These schools are committed to fostering inclusive spaces where both students and staff from diverse backgrounds feel valued, connected and supported. Trauma sensitive schools acknowledge the high prevalence of traumatic exposure for students, the importance of staff wellness, and strive to meet the unique needs of all learners.

A trauma sensitive approach is not a one-time strategy, but rather, it is the lens through which staff view all aspects of their work. It continuously shapes how staff build relationships, respond to challenges, and design systems that foster healing, connection, and equity. The trauma sensitive lens includes (DPI, 2023):

- **Safety:** Physical, emotional, and psychological safety are enhanced through predictable routines, caring relationships, opportunities for regulation, and positive school climates free from violence. Universal programming and a focus on social connectedness increase real and perceived safety between students, staff, and caregivers.

- **Trustworthiness:** Students, staff, and caregivers perceive the school system and individuals within it as honest, truthful, and reliable. Schools foster trustworthiness when individuals are treated with respect, appropriate boundaries are maintained, practices and procedures are clear and consistent, and cultural identities of groups and individuals are considered assets.
- **Cultural Responsiveness:** School leaders seek to understand the unique values, beliefs, and behaviors of the school community and apply that understanding to implement practices that adapt to the broad diversity of race, language, and culture. The school community recognizes the history of systemic oppression in education and works to prevent and redress these harms.
- **Empowerment:** School leaders provide space and opportunities for students and staff to recognize their own greatness by building resilience, providing opportunities to build mastery, and fostering a growth mindset. The school community uses person-first language and recognizes students, caregivers, and staff as strong and capable.
- **Collaboration:** Staff, students, and caregivers have authentic opportunities to collaborate and co-create programs, practices, policies, and procedures of the school and district. They listen to what families say about their children’s interests and challenges and talk with students about how they want to be supported.
- **Choice:** Schools maximize student experiences of choice and control while maintaining high expectations and trust students and families as experts in their own situations. Staff engage students in problem-solving to promote power sharing and agency. Individual student planning is family-driven and youth-guided.

Trauma Sensitive Schools (TSS) Six Guiding Principles

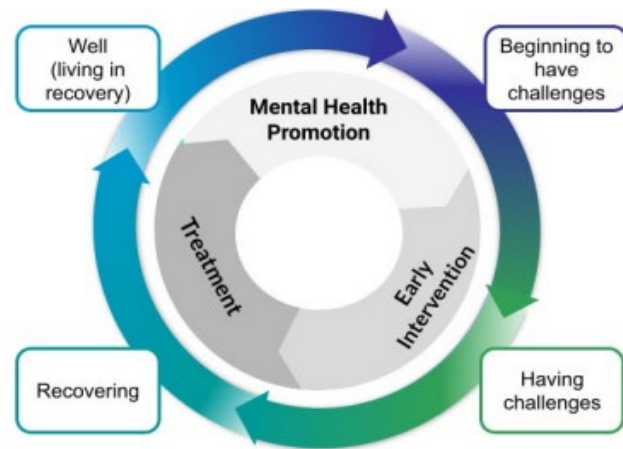


How Do Mental Health Literacy and TSS Fit into the Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework?

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 Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems (CSMHS): continuum of supports, mental health referral pathways, data, collaboration, needs assessment and resource mapping, and sustainability. The goal of the framework is to increase health and educational equity by building 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 education for students and staff is a key aspect of mental health promotion, as it encourages the development of knowledge and skills that help students and staff live healthy lives.

The guiding principles of a TSS offer a lens through which to implement, improve, and evaluate programs, policies, and practices in a CSMHS. For example, the trauma sensitive lens can be applied to the continuum of supports, specifically mental health literacy efforts. “In a school implementing a CSMHS with a trauma sensitive lens, staff understand the prevalence and impact of trauma, work to form positive relationships with students and families, and engage students and families as experts in their own experience and agents of their own healing...School staff routinely examine how policies, practices, and interpersonal interactions uphold the guiding principles of trauma sensitivity and change those that may be contributing to harm, traumatization, and re-traumatization” (DPI 2021).

How Does Mental Health Literacy Increase a School’s Trauma Sensitivity?

Just as the guiding principles of TSS can guide implementation of mental health literacy efforts, mental health literacy efforts can also increase the trauma sensitivity of a school or district. The following table crosswalks the Components of mental health literacy with the guiding principles of a trauma sensitive school.

MHL Component	TSS Guiding Principle(s)	How MHL Promotes/Supports the Principle
Mental Health Knowledge	Safety Collaboration Cultural Responsiveness	<p>Knowledge of mental health signs and symptoms and how these may impact learning and engagement enables educators to create predictable routines, foster opportunities for regulation, and build connections, all of which create a sense of felt safety for students. Educators who understand how mental health and trauma can affect learning and behavior can also collaborate more effectively with families, school staff, and students themselves to better support students academically, socially, and emotionally.</p> <p>In addition, it is important for educators to recognize that some marginalized student groups are placed at increased risk of experiencing both mental health challenges and trauma, and that discrimination, marginalization, and chronic stress can have significant impacts on mental health. Educators with this knowledge can respond in ways that affirm students’ identities and lived experiences, helping to build a culturally responsive school community, rather than one that perpetuates harm.</p>
Ability to Build and Maintain Positive Mental Health	Empowerment Choice Trustworthiness	<p>Teaching and modeling practices that support well-being builds student resilience, fosters the development of a growth mindset, and helps to empower students to build and maintain positive mental health. When educators prioritize their own positive mental health, through trauma sensitive practices such as practicing regulation and fostering compassion resilience in themselves and colleagues, they are better empowered to support both their own and student well-being.</p>

MHL Component	TSS Guiding Principle(s)	How MHL Promotes/Supports the Principle
		<p>Teaching and modeling these practices also helps students to develop a repertoire of strategies, enabling them to make choices about how they can best build and maintain their well-being. Similarly, when educators have the systems and support to make choices about wellness practices that meet their needs, it models the importance of individualized approaches to mental health and boosts educator well-being.</p> <p>In addition, when schools consistently prioritize and model positive mental health practices, students, families, and educators experience the school as a trustworthy place that consistently values well-being and responds with care.</p>
Ability to Seek Help and Provide Support	Safety Trustworthiness Collaboration	<p>When students and staff feel emotionally and physically safe, they are more likely to take the vulnerable step of reaching out for mental health support or supporting others. A sense of trustworthiness, built through consistent, transparent communication and reliable relationships, encourages individuals to believe that when they seek help, their needs will be met with respect, confidentiality, and compassion. Additionally, collaboration creates a shared responsibility for mental health and well-being across the school community. When staff, students, families, and community partners work together to identify challenges and co-create solutions that support the whole child, help-seeking becomes not just an individual act, but part of a connected, supportive school community. Together, these trauma sensitive principles cultivate an environment where seeking help is normalized and supported, increasing a school’s overall mental health literacy.</p>
Stigma Reduction	Cultural Responsiveness Empowerment Choice	<p>Creating a school culture that actively reduces mental health stigma starts with recognizing and honoring the diverse ways students, families, and staff experience mental health and healing. Schools that practice cultural responsiveness take time to understand how mental health is viewed within different communities and intentionally use language, practices, and supports that</p>

MHL Component	TSS Guiding Principle(s)	How MHL Promotes/Supports the Principle
		<p>resonate with those values. This approach replaces assumptions with curiosity and builds more inclusive pathways to connection. Reducing stigma also means creating space for individuals to share their stories and strengths, which increases choice.</p> <p>By promoting empowerment, schools can help students and staff view themselves not as defined by a diagnosis or struggle, but as capable contributors to their community. In addition, schools that emphasize choice allow individuals to engage with mental health supports in ways that feel most meaningful and comfortable to them, whether that's through trusted adults, small group spaces, culturally rooted practices, or other supportive approaches. Together, these trauma sensitive practices gradually shift the culture from one of silence or shame to one of acceptance, belonging and mental wellness.</p>

Reflection Questions

1. How might we structure school and classroom environments to allow students to routinely apply mental health literacy skills in a way that aligns with trauma sensitive principles?
2. How can we communicate about the connections between TSS and mental health literacy to students, staff, and caregivers?
3. In what ways are we using the TSS guiding principles and MHL components to identify and reduce disparities in mental health supports, outcomes, and access among our students?

References

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