



Mental Health Literacy and Direct Support Professionals: Why Does it Matter?

What is mental health literacy?

There are three main skills in mental health literacy: identifying mental health concerns, locating evidence-based resources, and responding to mental health concerns. These three skills prepare you to help others (and yourself) access mental health services. Mental health concerns can be thought of as a spectrum. Everybody experiences mental health concerns at some point in their life, but some are more severe than others. Being able to recognize potential mental health concerns, locate evidence-based resources, and respond to concerns with respect and empathy helps us to support our own mental health as well as the mental health of those we serve.

Why is mental health literacy important for direct support professionals?

Direct support professionals, or people who provide services for people with disabilities, often work with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Mental health literacy is important for direct support professionals to understand because everyone experiences mental health concerns.

Many people believe that individuals with IDD don't experience mental health concerns, but this is not true. In fact, research shows that people with IDD experience mental health concerns more than people without IDD. Because it is so common for people with IDD to have mental health concerns, mental health literacy skills are essential for direct support professionals. It's also important for direct support professionals to be able to recognize potential mental health concerns in themselves, so they can access resources and keep providing meaningful support to those they work with.

Things to Consider as a Direct Support Professional Addressing Mental Health Concerns

As a direct support professional, it is important to understand that it is not your job to diagnose mental health concerns, and you should not feel responsible to do that. Instead, your role involves identifying mental health concerns, following your agency's procedures to document signs and symptoms of potential mental health concerns, and advocate for the



individuals you support by sharing your observations with the right people, like house supervisors, care coordinators, or case managers.

Why is important to be able to recognize mental health concerns in yourself as a direct support professional?

Working as a direct support professional can take a toll on your mental and emotional health. Sometimes, people working in these positions experience *burnout*, which usually involves feeling more exhausted than usual, not doing as well at your job as you usually do, and feeling mentally distanced from or negative about your work (Gray-Stanley et al., 2013; World Health Organization, 2019). Mental health literacy skills can help you recognize signs of burnout in yourself and help you know when it is time to take a break and/or access other resources to support your mental health and wellbeing.

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References

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