

THE SCIENCE AND STIGMA OF MENTAL HEALTH

A guide for further education and skills leaders and managers



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CHALLENGING THE DOUBLE STIGMA OF POVERTY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Introduction

In an inclusive further education (FE) and skills culture, we should foster a sense of belonging for staff and learners, regardless of socio-economic background. Addressing mental health and poverty stigma can foster inclusion, reduce isolation, and provide opportunities for everyone to thrive. FE and skills leaders can develop strategies to create a supportive, mentally healthy environment, addressing poverty and mental health issues compassionately and comprehensively.

This resource will explore the connection between poverty, deprivation and mental health and challenge you as a leader to consider the impact of poverty on the performance of staff and learners. Openly addressing mental health in relation to lived experience of poverty not only supports individuals but strengthens the organisation, creating a culture where people feel safe, understood, and valued.

THE REAL PAIN OF EXCLUSION

The neuroscience of stress

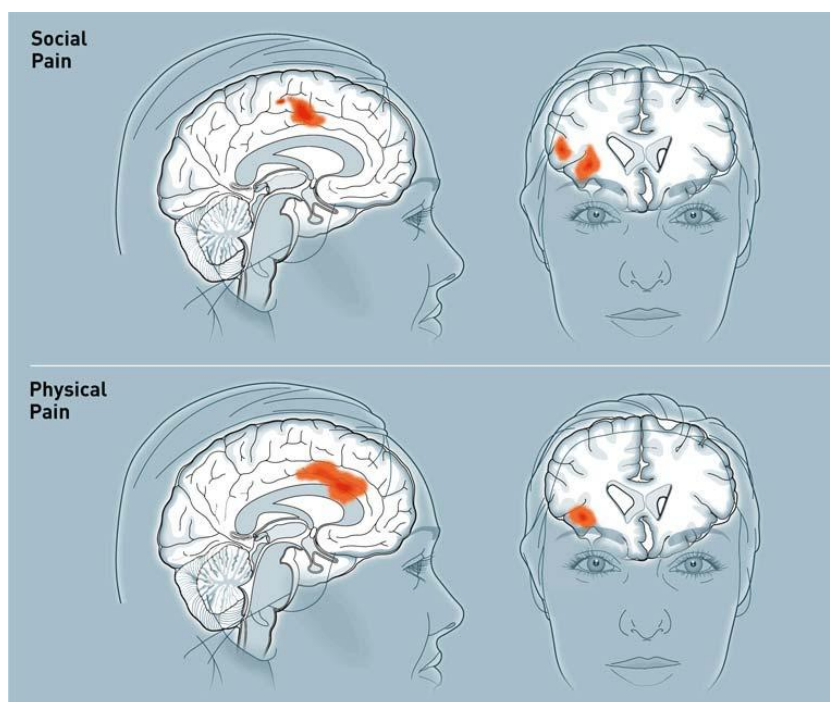
Poverty leads to constant stress, affecting the brain's functions, particularly the parts controlling emotions and thinking. Alison Caldwell, co-creator of the YouTube Channel all about the brain writes about the [Neuroscience of Stress](#) to highlight how stress hormones like cortisol are released, making it difficult to think, focus, or feel calm. This can result in feelings of anxiety, sadness, or depression. The part of the brain (the amygdala) that handles emotions, becomes more sensitive, making it easier to feel anxious or upset. The prefrontal cortex, the thinking part, helps people make decisions and control their emotions. Constant stress makes it harder for the prefrontal cortex to function correctly, making it harder to concentrate or make decisions. This can lead to mental health problems like anxiety and depression, which can hinder access to education, work, and financial success. Over time, this creates a cycle where stress makes it harder to achieve success, and not doing well makes people feel even more stressed. There are many stressors in life but the prevalence of deprivation and poverty within the FE and skills community warrants its own spotlight, to better understand its impact on staff, learners and the overall educational experience.

The link between poverty, deprivation, and mental health is clear, often creating a cycle that is difficult to escape. Poverty increases the risk of mental health issues but additionally, there is a significant divide in access to mental health support, depending on the affluence of an area. A [national study into mental and physical health](#) released by The Sutton Trust in November 2023 of

over 11,000 learners aged between 17 and 18 years old, reveals that those in the most deprived parts of England are the least likely to receive mental health support when requested. In this context, education becomes an essential tool to break the cycle, providing support, hope, and opportunities for upliftment.

Social and physical pain are the same

The real pain of exclusion is something many of us overlook. Whether it's being left out at work, among friends, or even on social media, the emotional toll is real and profound. Exclusion leads to a distressing feeling that can affect us on a deeper level than we realise. In fact, there is a part of the brain called the anterior cingulate cortex, which lights up in response to both physical pain and social pain (see on the scan photo). This fascinating overlap highlights how similar the two are.



Eisenberger, N. I., & Lieberman, M. D. (2004). Why rejection hurts: A common neural alarm system for physical and social pain. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8(7), 294–300.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2004.05.010>

Imagine falling and injuring yourself; most people would instinctively reach for a painkiller or ice to ease the discomfort. But here's a surprising insight: social pain, like the distress from rejection or exclusion, activates the same neural pathways as physical pain. While we're not suggesting taking a painkiller for social pain, the key takeaway is that social exclusion has a profound impact on our well-being and should be taken seriously.

When the brain senses exclusion, it responds with distress, making us feel vulnerable and threatened. This activates the emotional centres of the brain, amplifying the negative experience. The bottom line is that if we aren't consciously making efforts to include others, we could unintentionally be leaving them out. And this, over time, can cause real harm.

Ideas for addressing the pain of exclusion

Creating safe, inclusive spaces: prioritise creating environments where everyone feels welcome. Safe spaces for discussion, or support networks, fostering inclusion should be an active, ongoing process.

Proactively include and amplify the voices of those who may feel excluded. Representation is crucial in helping individuals feel seen and valued within the workplace and community.

Encouraging open dialogue: Encouraging open and honest conversations about inclusion can help uncover hidden feelings of exclusion. Allowing individuals to express their concerns and experiences openly creates a path toward healing and inclusion.

Mentorship and support networks: Building formal or informal mentorship programmes can help individuals who feel excluded to connect with others, providing them with the support they need to feel part of the community.

The pain of not feeling included runs deep, affecting all aspects of an individual's life. For leaders in education and beyond, recognising and addressing this issue is key to building a truly inclusive, supportive environment where everyone can thrive. healthy minds

Optimal brain functioning: the healthy mind platter

The [Healthy Mind Platter](#), created by Dr Daniel J. Siegel, Executive Director of the [Mindsight Institute](#) and Dr David Rock, Executive Director of the [NeuroLeadership Institute](#), offers a practical approach to mental wellness, highlighting the different activities that contribute to optimal brain functioning. It emphasises a balance, just like a well-rounded diet, across seven essential mental activities. The Healthy Mind Platter is a simple guide to help us ensure we are providing ourselves with the correct 'ingredients' to enable our brains to function at an optimum level. It comprises seven essential activities that we can consider when trying to achieve a healthy balance.



The Healthy Mind Platter, for Optimal Brain Matter™

Source: [Reintroducing: The Healthy Mind Platter](#)

Here are some tips and tricks to keep your brain healthy and maintain your cognitive power:

- **Physical time:** Time to move our bodies, aerobically if medically possible, to strengthen the brain in many ways.
- **Focus time:** Time to closely focus on tasks in a goal-oriented way, take on challenges that make deep connections in the brain. The recommended duration with no other distractions is 60-90 minutes.
- **Connecting time:** Time to connect with other people, ideally in person, and when we take time to appreciate our connection to the natural world around us, to activate and reinforce the brain's relational circuitry.
- **Playtime:** Time to allow ourselves to be spontaneous or creative, playfully enjoying novel experiences, to help make new connections in the brain.
- **Downtime:** Time when we can be non-focused, without any specific goal, to let our mind wander, simply relax, daydream out of the window, will help the brain recharge. Downtime also contributes to those 'Aha' moments or insights. A short Downtime is specifically useful before a Focus time.
- **Time in:** Time to quietly reflect internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, this could be meditation, watching nature, breathing exercise, Mindfulness, all to help to better integrate the brain. Tools and Insights to create a sense of belonging, improve wellbeing and combat the effects of poverty.
- **Sleep time:** Time to give the brain the rest it needs, ideally 8 uninterrupted hours (or if in Europe to include the hours in 'Siesta' time) to consolidate learning and recover from the experiences of the day.

The Healthy Mind Platter is a helpful framework designed to support cognitive well-being by promoting a balanced lifestyle. By incorporating these activities into daily life, we can:

Prevent burnout by ensuring that time isn't overly focused on work or stress-inducing tasks, providing necessary space for rest, relaxation, and creativity.

Enhance mental health by supporting key functions like emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, social connection, and self-awareness, which are crucial for maintaining a healthy mind.

Promote wellbeing by encouraging a personalised mix of activities, ensuring people engage in a range of tasks that fuel different aspects of their mental and physical health. This balance reduces stress, supports mental clarity, and fosters emotional resilience, making it a practical strategy for maintaining a healthy, well-rounded life.



[The NLI SCARF® Assessment | NeuroLeadership Institute](#)

Socially motivated psychologically safe spaces: the SCARF® Model

The [SCARF® Model](#) assesses differences in people's social motivations, recognising that individuals are more sensitive to certain factors like status, certainty, or relatedness. By understanding these variations, leaders can reflect on the learning environment and shape organisational strategies and policies mindfully to ensure staff and learners feel valued, engaged, and supported. Consciously or not, every time we interact with someone, we're meeting some of their social needs and perhaps depriving them of others, and thus our language, behaviour and overall organisational culture can impact on whether an individual feels uplifted and motivated or causes them to withdraw and shut down.

The rectangle in the centre, contains the things we hold dear to, the attributes we value most in a working or learning environment context. When all of them are in place we feel motivated towards the right-hand arrow of reward and response. When they're threatened, we tend to move away in the left-hand direction, the classic human response to threats.

Interestingly, the drive to move away from a threat response is disproportionately powerful. A threat response will send us running for the hills much faster and more efficiently than a reward response will attract us. This makes sense evolutionarily because the humans who noticed and acted on threats in ancient times would have survived better than those who walked towards a threat. It also explains why humans tend to focus more naturally on negatives than positives. Consider the threats associated with poverty and deprivation and how this may impact mental health and wellbeing of FE and skills communities. What can FE and skills leaders do to ensure strategies and policies are poverty-informed, supporting an inclusive and engaging learning environment?

Responding to threats

- Blood is redirected from the brain to the muscles
- Less creativity
- Fewer insights
- Fewer ideas for new things to do
- Focus on the here and now.

Responding to rewards

- Increased blood flow to the brain
- More creativity
- Problem solving and insights
- Fresh ideas for things to do
- An ability to focus on bigger things
- Empowered.

Make time to gain a better understanding of your own sensitivity to the different social drivers in each SCARF® domain. It can help you identify which factors; status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, or fairness most influence your motivation and engagement. Consider how you might also use this with staff teams and learners to support a conversation about what drives individuals to engage with work and learning, addressing the barriers (threats) to engagement.

Creating a “brain safe” culture

You could use the SCARF® as a framework for your conversations and understanding around how we look at psychological safety in education settings working collaboratively across the whole-organisation. These are just some of the aspects of how you can intentionally design your work culture and collaboration to create a safe environment for people to thrive.

Whether people perceive situations like change, conflict, feedback, or questions as a potential threat or reward in relation to their SCARF® drivers will significantly impact your success in developing, adapting, or transforming your organisation and ways of working.

Status - Status is the drive we feel to stand out from the crowd. When we share our new ideas and receive credit for a job well done, status is that glow of importance and value we're looking for.

Reflect: How do organisational structures and titles affect peoples' perceptions of accessibility and inclusivity? How does organisational decision-making impact on staff and learner engagement? Are all voices empowered and heard?

Certainty - Humans naturally like to know what's going on. We like to understand our surroundings and be able to predict outcomes.

Reflect: How can we address uncertainty within the sector and society? What is the role of prevention and early intervention mental health support services in addressing uncertainty?

Autonomy – We all like to feel a sense of control over the work we do and the decisions we make.

Reflect: Can managers, leaders, staff and learners make their own decisions or do our structures,

systems and processes not allow this? What should inclusive leadership look like in education settings?

Relatedness - Whether or not we mean to, humans draw boundaries around their groups. Some people are part of an “in-group,” while others fall in the “out-group.” Relatedness is the sense that we belong that we’re in the in-group.

Reflect: How do we support relationships and build trust in our organisation? Can we proactively bring communities together across our diverse sector?

Fairness - Humans innately want to feel a sense of equity in social interactions. We prefer what’s justified over what’s tilted in one party’s favour.

Reflect: How do we design equal opportunities within the curriculum, support services, and across organisational structures to benefit the whole learning community?

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACTIONS FOR FE AND SKILLS LEADERS

Promote open conversations

- **Bridge gaps and connect communities:** Encourage open dialogue between diverse groups of learners and staff, ensuring that mental health support is available throughout the academic year and even during breaks. Working in partnership with external health and support services will be critical.
- **Importance of strategy and Culture:** Design strategies that place inclusion, mental health, and wellbeing at the heart of your organisation’s culture. Incorporate these into every aspect of curriculum design, sustainability initiatives, and staff development.

Amplify the learner voice: Make sure that learner perspectives are heard, respected, and acted upon. Involving them in decisions about mental health policies helps shape a culture that reflects their needs.

- **Normalise mental health conversations:** Make mental health discussions an everyday part of institutional dialogue to reduce the stigma surrounding these challenges. This promotes a climate of trust and openness.

Contextualise and challenge stigma

- **Address barriers to mental health support:** Identify the systemic or social barriers that hinder access to mental health resources, and work to remove them. Whether it’s cultural stigma or institutional barriers, these barriers can prevent people from seeking help.
- **Combat stereotypes:** Actively challenge and dismantle stereotypes about mental health within your organisation. Creating a more empathetic, stigma-free environment benefits everyone.

Self-awareness for leaders

- **Reflect on personal mental health:** As a leader, continuously assess your own mental wellbeing. Recognise and address any struggles or biases you may have to ensure you're leading with empathy.
- **Impact of bias on leadership:** Understanding how your own biases affect your leadership is crucial. Acknowledge how personal views on mental health and demography could shape policies or affect decision-making and adjust your approach accordingly.

Recognise and reflect on bias

- **Challenge personal biases:** Actively seek out and challenge your own biases, whether related to mental health or broader social issues. Self-awareness in this area can lead to more compassionate and inclusive leadership practices.
- **Foster inclusive leadership practices:** By addressing biases, leaders can create an environment that is supportive and understanding of the mental health challenges that staff and learners may face. This approach ensures that everyone, regardless of background or mental health status, feels they belong.

Provide access to resources

- **Mental health support systems:** Make sure that provision of and signposting to mental health and wellbeing services, are easily accessible to everyone in the organisation.
- **Consistent accessibility:** Mental health support should be accessible at all times, not only in response to a crisis, within a multi-agency approach to mental health and wellbeing. Prevention and early-intervention is critical, to ensure individuals access the help they need at the right time.

Offer education, training and support to staff

- **Leadership coaching** plays a significant role in enhancing individual wellbeing by focusing on personal growth, stress management, and work-life balance. It equips individuals with the skills to manage both mental and physical health more effectively, leading to improved personal wellbeing and a healthier work environment.
- **Empathy and recognition training:** Equip staff with the skills to recognise signs of mental distress and respond with empathy. Regular training can prepare them to offer the right support and guidance to learners or colleagues in need.
- **Continued professional development:** Keep your staff updated on best practices for mental health and inclusion through continuous professional development. This ensures a forward-thinking, supportive institutional culture.

Lead by example

- **Transparency in leadership:** Demonstrate openness regarding your own mental health. Sharing your experiences can reduce stigma, normalise these conversations, and create a safe space for others to share their struggles as well.

- **Share personal wellbeing stories:** When leaders talk about their own wellbeing journeys, it encourages others to follow suit. This openness contributes to a more inclusive, stigma-free environment where everyone feels they belong.

CASE STUDY: DAMAR TRAINING

At Damar Training we have been on a journey when it comes to looking after the mental and health and wellbeing of our team.

Employee wellbeing has always been a priority, and we had intentionally engaged with support services such as Westfield Health's employee assistance programme. However, during and post-pandemic, we recognised that an increased focus was required. As a result, alongside this formal support, a substantial long-term project to create and embed core values was undertaken to champion a positive work culture and support employee wellbeing.

Out of this project, which consulted extensively with colleagues, came the four values of *impact, accountability, one team* and *common purpose*. As these cultures became increasingly embedded – through employee inductions, culture champion awards and other activities – it really set the scene for us to be an organisation where honesty, openness, reflecting on and learning from mistakes, and trust were at its core. This approach to embed an inclusive organisational culture is critical in supporting positive health and wellbeing of all employees.

To support the organisational-culture project, several working groups were established, including *Wellbeing & Fun* and *Rewards & Recognition*. These groups were open for anyone to join and enabled people in different teams and at different levels to contribute to how the provider approached employee wellbeing and mental health.

Critical to the success of this project and the meaningfulness of the working groups, was the support and stewardship from the senior leadership team. Senior leaders were visibly committed to listening to their colleagues and championed the implementation of a range of ideas. It was recognised that a one-size-fits-all approach could exclude some, and that a diversity of input was critical. Everyone has mental health, but the experience will vary and can be impacted by so many factors. It was important to reflect on diversity and inclusion throughout the project.

In the first two years of the project, the focus was on aspects that had been brought about by the pandemic – for example, making sure that people felt connected and were supported whilst working remotely. More recently, this has evolved to become something much broader and which weaves through everything we do. In some cases, this has involved changes to company policies (such as support for staff who suffer a miscarriage); other changes have been much less formal. There are regular coffee-and-chat sessions that people can join to have a catch up and connect, fantasy football and other fun competitions that are managed through our staff hub. Resources, training and support are provided across a range of topics, including financial advice and getting a good night's sleep. Most recently, we have appointed a menopause champion to analyse and improve how we support colleagues during this time.

Underpinning the success of this activity is the senior leadership team who lead by example, demonstrating that they are “one of the team” rather than something separate. Most of the time, they don't work outside of normal working hours, and they don't answer emails whilst they are on annual leave. At their most recent staff conference, everyone participated in an exercise on the components of trust. Senior leaders shared their strengths and shortcomings, displaying enormous openness,

vulnerability and self-awareness, which only served to reinforce the Damar culture of “one team”, where people are truly put at the core of the business agenda. Inclusion and connection are central to positive health and wellbeing.

CHALLENGE STIGMA WITH INCLUSION



Habits of inclusion

The three habits of inclusion are simple, practical behaviours that promote an inclusive environment by fostering understanding, connection, and engagement. These habits encourage individuals to embrace differences and make others feel valued and heard. Inclusion has a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing in a number of ways, supporting a sense of belonging, reducing stigma, opening access to support, welcoming diverse perspectives, and reducing the risks associated with isolation and loneliness. As well as embedding these habits across staff teams and with learners, support learners to develop these habits individually, to promote peer-to-peer support and inclusive behaviours within FE and skills communities.

1. Finding Common Ground

- **What it means:** Actively seeking shared interests, values, or experiences with others to build a sense of connection and understanding.
- **Why it matters:** Finding common ground helps bridge differences, making people feel more comfortable and valued. It promotes collaboration and reduces feelings of isolation or exclusion.
- **How to practice it:** Start conversations by asking open-ended questions, listen actively, and focus on similarities rather than differences when engaging with others.

2. Lifting People Up

- **What it means:** Acknowledging and celebrating the contributions, achievements, and strengths of others to create an uplifting, supportive environment.

- **Why it matters:** When people feel appreciated and recognised, it boosts their confidence and engagement, encouraging them to contribute more and feel part of the team.
- **How to practice it:** Give specific, positive feedback, offer encouragement, and look for opportunities to support others' growth and success. Celebrate wins, big or small.

3. Giving Clarity

- **What it means:** Providing clear communication, expectations, and guidance to ensure everyone understands their role, the task at hand, and the overall goal.
- **Why it matters:** Clear communication fosters transparency, reduces misunderstandings, and makes it easier for everyone to contribute effectively. It also helps create an environment where people feel safe asking questions.
- **How to practice it:** Be concise and transparent in your communications. Regularly check in with others to ensure they understand and feel confident in what is expected of them. Offer guidance and direction when needed.

Together, these habits cultivate an inclusive atmosphere where people feel connected, valued, and empowered to contribute fully.

Inclusion isn't just a courtesy, it's essential for neurological and emotional wellbeing.

Thank you



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