

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Lunch and Learn Series



Missouri Department of
MENTAL HEALTH



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH &
SENIOR SERVICES**

A GUIDE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS



In public health, we don't just work with data, policies, and programs—we work with people. We sit with community trauma, navigate complex systems, and collaborate across teams under pressure. In this kind of environment, emotional intelligence (EI) isn't a “nice to have.” It's a critical skill for sustainable, humane, and effective work.

EI is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage your own emotions, and to recognize, understand, and respond effectively to the emotions of others. It shapes how we handle stress, how we communicate, how we resolve conflict, and how we show up as coworkers, supervisors, and leaders.

When practiced intentionally, EI can:

- Reduce conflict and misunderstandings
- Improve communication and trust on teams
- Support trauma-informed, compassionate interactions
- Decrease burnout by helping us notice and respond to early warning signs
- Ultimately improve services and outcomes for the communities we serve

Instead of just asking, “What do I need to do?” EI adds,

“How am I feeling while I do it—and how is everyone else doing in this process?”

CORE COMPONENTS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Most models of EI include four key skill areas. You don't need to be perfect in all of them to benefit; even small growth in one area can make a meaningful difference in your work life.

1. SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is the ability to notice and name what you're feeling and how it's affecting you.

It includes:

- Recognizing your emotional "tells" (tight shoulders, irritability, shutting down)
- Noticing patterns—when you're more reactive, more avoidant, or more patient
- Understanding how your mood affects your decision-making, tone, and behavior

In public health, self-awareness might sound like:

"I notice I feel defensive whenever this partner questions our data. I'm going to pause and consider why this hits a nerve for me before I respond."

2. SELF-MANAGEMENT

Self-management is what you do with your emotions once you notice them. It's not about ignoring or suppressing feelings, but about responding in ways that align with your values and role.

Self-management can look like:

- Taking a brief pause before responding in a heated moment
- Using grounding or breathing techniques in stressful meetings
- Setting small boundaries to protect your focus and

In practice:

"I'm frustrated after that call. Before I email the group, I'm going to take a short walk and then draft a calmer response."

3. SOCIAL AWARENESS

Social awareness is the ability to read the emotional climate around you and notice how others might be feeling, even if they don't say it directly.

It includes:

- Noticing tone, body language, and energy in a room
- Being curious about the impact of trauma, culture, and lived experience
- Recognizing when someone might be shutting down or overwhelmed

Example:

"Halfway through this meeting, I notice our community partner is quieter and looks disengaged. I might need to slow down, check in, or invite their perspective more intentionally."

4. RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Relationship management is using self-awareness and social awareness to communicate clearly, build trust, and navigate conflict.

It might involve:

- Addressing tension directly but respectfully
- Owning your part of a misunderstanding
- Offering feedback in ways that are honest and supportive
- Repairing when a conversation didn't go well

Example:

"I realized my tone came across as dismissive in yesterday's huddle. I'm going to circle back and say, 'I'm sorry about how that landed. That wasn't my intention.'"

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN PUBLIC HEALTH WORK

EI is especially important in public health because we work at the intersection of:

- Community trauma and structural inequities
- Limited resources and high expectations
- Diverse teams and complex systems

For frontline staff, EI helps with:

- Managing difficult interactions without shutting down or lashing out
- Holding empathy for clients while still maintaining boundaries
- Recognizing signs of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma early

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In trauma-informed systems, EI and trauma-informed principles overlap: **safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment** all require tuned-in, emotionally aware relationships.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO BUILD EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

You don't have to overhaul your personality to strengthen your EI. Small, intentional practices can add up over time.

1. The Brief Check-In

Once or twice a day, ask yourself:

- "What am I feeling right now?"
- "Where do I feel it in my body?"
- "How might this be affecting how I'm interacting with others?"

Even a 30-second check-in helps you shift from autopilot to awareness.

2. The "Pause Button"

When emotions are high—frustration, anger, defensiveness—practice inserting a small pause before acting.

Your pause might be:

- Taking three slow breaths
- Saying, "Let me think about that and get back to you."
- Writing a draft email and saving it instead of sending right away"

The goal isn't to eliminate emotion; it's to give your thinking brain time to catch up.

3. Naming Emotions

The simple act of naming what you're feeling can reduce intensity and clarify what you need.

Instead of "I'm just stressed," try getting more specific:

- "I feel anxious about this deadline."
- "I feel discouraged after that meeting."
- "I feel irritated because I don't feel heard."

Naming emotions also helps in conversations with others:

"I'm noticing I'm getting frustrated, and I want us to slow down so we can stay constructive."

4. Practicing Curiosity

When someone reacts strongly or differently than you expect, try **curiosity instead of judgment**.

Ask yourself:

- “What else might be going on for them?”
- “What might this situation feel like from their perspective?”
- “What’s the story I’m telling myself—and what other stories could be true?”

In conversation, curiosity sounds like:

- “Can you help me understand how you’re seeing this?”
- “It seems like this is really important to you—tell me more about that.”

5. Repairing When Things Go Sideways

No matter how emotionally intelligent we are, we will get it wrong sometimes. What matters is our willingness to **repair**.

Repair might sound like:

- “I realized my comment came off as harsh. I’m sorry—that wasn’t my intention.”
- “I interrupted you earlier. I’d like to hear what you were trying to say.”
- “I was more reactive than I wanted to be. Can we revisit that conversation?”

Repair builds trust and shows that relationships matter more than being “right.”

COMMON MYTHS AND CHALLENGES

Even when we value EI, a few myths can get in the way:

“Emotional intelligence means being nice all the time.” EI isn’t about avoiding hard truths. It’s about how you communicate them—with respect and awareness of impact.	“There’s no room for emotion at work.” Emotions are already present. EI simply helps us notice and work with them, rather than letting them quietly drive our decisions and behavior.
“I’m just not an emotional person.” Everyone has emotions. You don’t need to become outwardly expressive to develop EI; you just need to become more aware and more intentional.	“If I let myself feel things, I’ll fall apart.” EI isn’t about drowning in feelings—it’s about acknowledging them so they can move, instead of building up in the background.

QUICK REFLECTION ACTIVITY

You can use this on your own or with a team.

Self-awareness check	Other-awareness check	Self-awareness check
• Think of a recent stressful situation at work. • What were you feeling at the time? How did your body respond? • How did those feelings influence what you said or did?	• In that same situation, what do you think others were feeling? • What clues did you notice in their tone, body language, or behavior?	• If you could go back, what’s one emotionally intelligent action you might try? (A pause, a clarifying question, naming your emotion, checking in with someone, etc.)

ACTIVITY

EI is not about being perfect, calm, or composed at all times. It's about becoming more aware, more intentional, and more humane with yourself and others.

This week, choose one small practice:

- A daily 30-second emotional check-in
- Pausing before responding when you feel activated
- Naming one emotion in a meeting or supervision session
- Asking one curious, open-ended question when tension arises

Write down the practice you're choosing and where you'll apply it (team meetings, community visits, supervision, email responses, etc.).

As EI grows across teams and organizations, we create workplaces that are more resilient, more compassionate, and better equipped to serve communities facing complex challenges.

For additional resources on workforce well-being and trauma-informed practices, visit dmh.mo.gov.

