

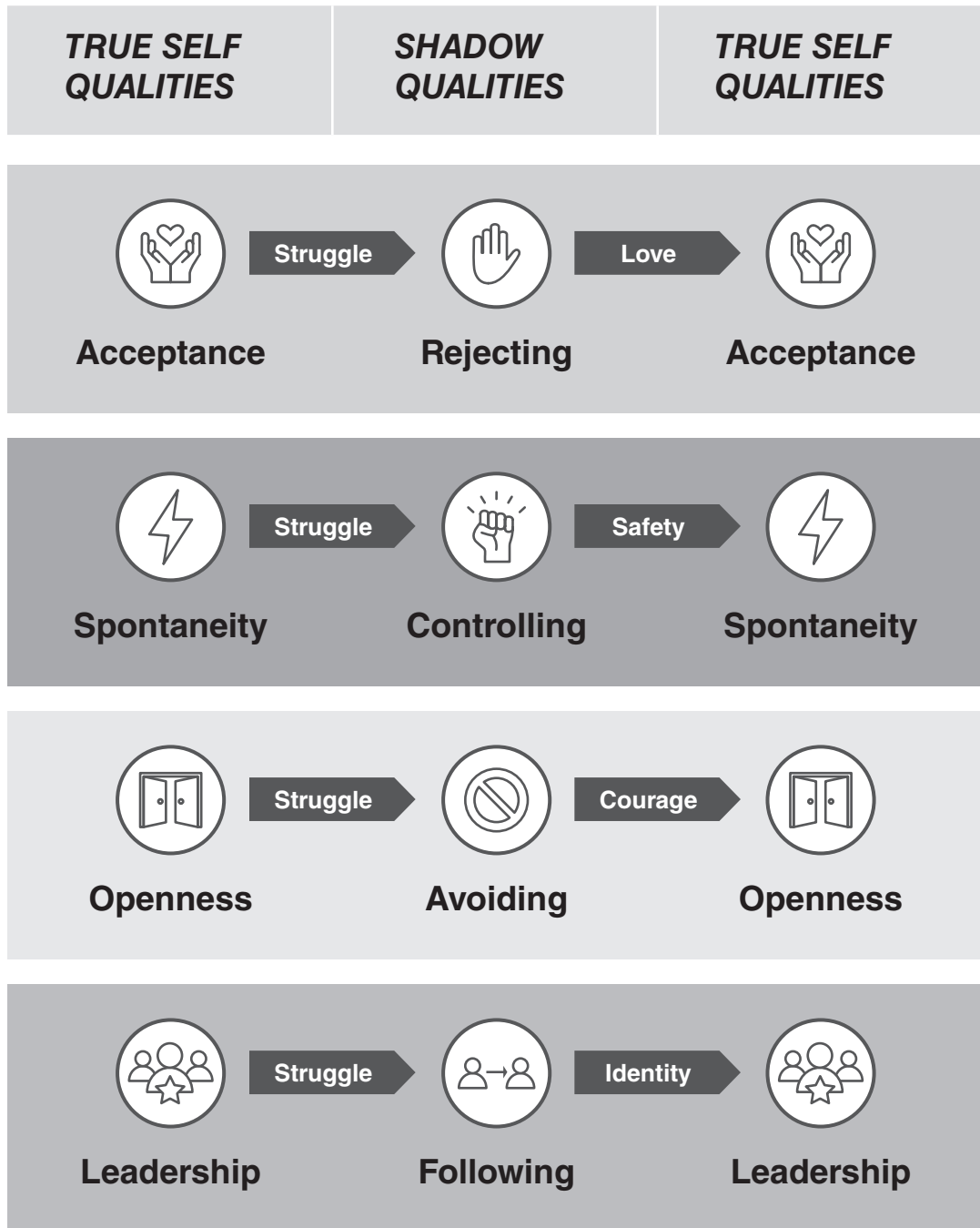
# 1

## Understanding Student Mental Health

This chapter will give you an overview of how to understand youth mental health. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the theory that underpins the guided conversations that you will learn about to help you with some of the challenges that your students face. You can read this chapter first if you prefer to understand the broader perspective before diving into the guided conversations, or you can read this chapter after you have started flipping to the chapters that relate to your students' challenges and using the tips associated with each specific situation.

### **Shadow Qualities and the True Self**

In order to support student mental health, it's important that we start to break down this concept so that we can better understand the ways that we can help. Every student is equipped with a set of qualities that lead to resilience and that help them overcome the struggles they face. The qualities that we focus on in this book are *acceptance*, *spontaneity*, *openness*, *leadership*, and *freedom of choice*. I synthesized these qualities from my research, clinical practice, and experience with student mental health. There are many ways to look at mental health, but in my experience, these qualities are the key to determining whether a student will struggle or thrive. Students turn away from these qualities toward their *shadow* qualities when they are faced with adversity and forget their natural ability to overcome whatever it is they are facing. Throughout this book, you will learn how to support your students each time they have turned to a shadow quality by reminding them how to make the journey back to their true self quality. To help you understand this concept, see Figure 1.1.



**Figure 1.1 Shadow and true self qualities.**

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### **Figure Explanations**

Students can exhibit one or more of these expressions at any given time, and are always on a continuum moving back and forth between their true self qualities and their shadow qualities, depending on the challenges they encounter and the resources they have to face and overcome them.

**Rejecting/Acceptance (Remembering Love)** Children naturally accept the world around them, the people they encounter, and the experience of things not going their way. However, they move away from this acceptance and start to reject themselves and the world around them if they are repeatedly hurt by people or circumstances, or are not shown a level of acceptance by others. These experiences cause them to lose trust in their connections with others or in the world in general. Students displaying these behaviors need to know they are *loved* so they can return to a state of accepting their reality.

**Controlling/Spontaneity (Remembering Safety)** Children have a natural level of spontaneity, making decisions based on how they feel in each moment, without too much concern for getting things “right” or following a plan. However, they move away from this spontaneity and seek to control themselves and their world when they have experiences of change that are harmful or chaotic. This causes them to fear change, and become cautious with anything unplanned or unpredicted. Students responding in this way need to know they are *safe* so they can return to their natural fluid and spontaneous state.

**Avoiding/Openness (Remembering Courage)** Children are naturally open to their internal reality, and possess an incredible level of honesty in expressing their feelings, needs, and wants. However, if their emotions are not tended to when they are expressed, or they are shut down or shamed for their vulnerability, they start to avoid their feelings and any situations that trigger those feelings. These patterns also arise if children witness similar avoidance tactics in the adults close to them. Students who are in a state of avoidance need to remember their own *courage* so they can return to their natural state of openness to their own emotions.

**Following/Leadership (Remembering Identity)** Children have an incredible amount of agency, and make choices about their own actions based on what feels inherently right to them, regardless of outside influences, which is an important quality of any great leader. However, when they are not encouraged to use this agency, or are forced to bend to the will of others in ways that harm them or repeatedly work against their nature, they forget their ability to lead their own path, and instead, begin to blindly follow others. Students responding in this way need to strengthen their own *identity* to return to their natural state of leadership.

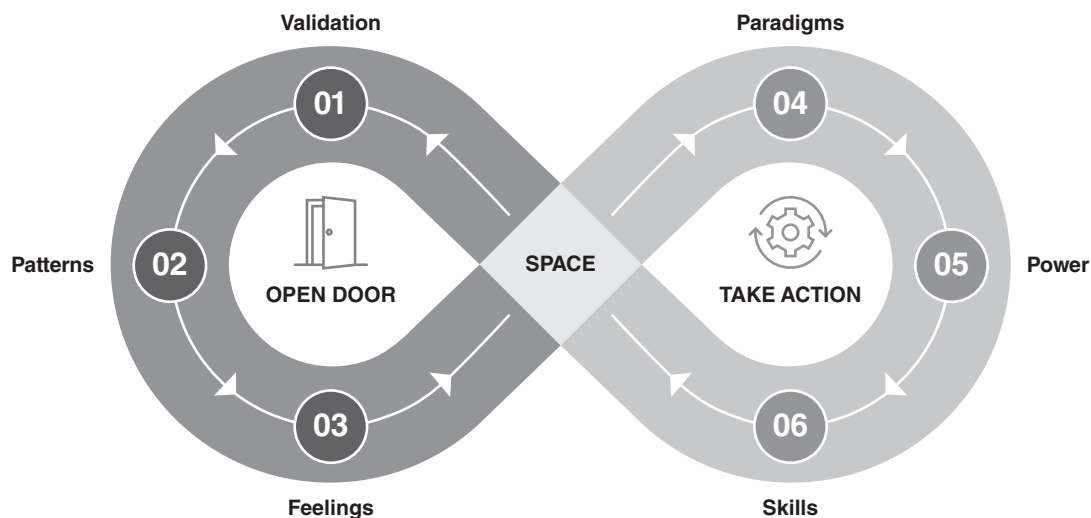
**Repeating/Freedom (Remembering Clarity)** Children naturally act from a place of freedom, changing their opinions, responses, and actions based on the new information they learn in each situation they encounter. However, if they are exposed to people who are repeating the same harmful actions over and over again, they lose sight of their own freedom of expression and begin repeating the patterns they have been exposed to rather than determining the action that is best for them to take in any given moment. Students caught in these patterns need to develop *clarity* so they can see their choices and return to their natural state of freely choosing their own path instead of repeating the path that has been laid down before them.

### ***Providing Support***

Students will struggle with these different shadow qualities to varying degrees at different times, depending on a variety of factors (e.g., family/cultural patterns, biological predispositions, early life trauma, support systems, and the nature and severity of current stressors). Understanding the different categories can help you understand what is going on for students, but what is most important is seeing the *universal* ways that we, as adults, can help students, no matter what shadow quality they are turning to.

The biggest threat to students' mental health is not that they face challenges; it's that they often don't have the understanding or the motivation to *take the steps needed to overcome these challenges*. That is why the constant encouragement, reminders, and guidance of how to navigate their personal struggles, coming from a trusted adult such as yourself, is so vital in their pathway to becoming a thriving, independent adult. Building mental health resilience is a skill set, and like any skill set, it requires learning. This learning is cyclical, and therefore, I refer to it as a *learning cycle*. This means that the steps of learning happen over and over again, in various orders, and must be applied to every new situation that a student encounters in order for them to generalize these skills.

For example, if a student is struggling to learn a math problem, they will need to be guided through the steps of how to face and overcome this (e.g., change their thoughts that they aren't smart, accept their feelings of frustration, keep trying to solve the problem even if it feels impossible). If they are then faced with a friendship challenge, they will need to use these same skills, but they will need to be guided to understand how to apply them in this different experience (e.g., change their thoughts that their friend doesn't care about them, accept their feelings of rejection, keep trying to communicate with their friend to repair the relationship).



**Figure 1.2** The learning cycle for building mental health skills.

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Every single challenge, big and small that a student encounters has an impact on their mental health because it affects their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Therefore, every challenge is a chance to reinforce the mental health skills that will help them in every area of their lives. This involves first *opening themselves up to see their challenges clearly*, and then *taking actions that will help them overcome these challenges*. See Figure 1.2 for an explanation of the learning cycle for building mental health skills incorporating these steps. This learning cycle will be referenced throughout this book, and you will be shown how it can be applied to each unique mental health struggle that you see in your students.

What you can do as an educator is to make *space* for students to move through the six steps of self-reflection that will help them navigate whatever struggle they find themselves in, that is, causing them to turn away from their true self and toward their shadow qualities. These steps fall into the two categories explained next.

### **Figure Explanations**

#### **Category 1: Open the Door.**

First, we help students open the door in their own mind to connect to what is really happening for them. We can do this by:

##### **1. Validating** them and their experiences.

*Validation* means letting a student know that what they are facing is normal, and we understand where they are coming from (e.g., “It’s okay to feel nervous about the future; that is a really common response when things feel out of control”) and that there is

nothing inherently wrong with them. Even if they are acting in an unhelpful way, we can validate them as a person while still discouraging their behavior (e.g., “I know you are a really good person, *and* some of the decisions you’re making right now are harmful”).

2. Helping them notice their own **patterns**.

A *pattern* is any behavioral reaction (e.g., swearing, pushing, not handing in homework, leaving people out, disregarding instructions, etc.), way of thinking (e.g., not believing in their own abilities, thinking everything is someone else’s fault, assuming that something bad will happen, etc.), or emotional response (e.g., feeling incredibly hurt by the unintentional actions of others, seeming not to care when they cause harm or don’t follow the rules, etc.). In order to change these patterns, students first have to *notice* them.

3. Encouraging them to relate directly to their **feelings**.

*Feelings* are the physical and emotional responses that a student has to their experiences. These might be in the form of emotions such as sadness, anger, confusion, or joy, or they could arise in the form of physical sensations such as an upset stomach, a headache, or fidgeting/struggling to sit still. Asking students directly about their feelings helps them to understand their own experiences better.

### Category 2: Take Action.

Second, we help students take actions to help themselves, by:

4. Helping them shift their **paradigm**, or the way they are seeing things.

A *paradigm* is a student’s fundamental views about themselves and the world. For example, a student who has experienced a loving and emotionally safe environment might develop a paradigm that the world is a loving place, and that their emotions are safe to experience. However, a student who has experienced the loss or abandonment of a parent, or who has not been given a chance to express their emotions, might develop a paradigm that the world is a harmful place, and that their emotions are unacceptable. There is always a problematic paradigm underneath any mental health struggle. When it can be shifted, a student is much more likely to see a positive path forward.

5. Reminding them of their **power**.

A student’s *power* is their ability to act with agency in their own world—their ability to enact change and influence their experiences. When a student faces challenges and is able to take actions that help them overcome these challenges, their belief in their own ability to help themselves increases, meaning they have more perceived power. If we can remind them of the power they have used in the past, students are much more able to draw on that same power in the future.

6. Supporting them to use a **skill** that helps them move forward.

*Skills* are anything a student does that helps them cope or change their physical and emotional circumstances. This can include setting boundaries, asking for help, changing the way they think about things, taking care of their emotions, connecting with others, eating well, exercising, and getting enough sleep. Anything that positively impacts a student's mental health is a skill they can use to make changes that will help them move toward their true self, and away from their shadow qualities. When a student is struggling, they often forget these skills and need to be reminded to use them again and again.

All of these steps are needed in order for students to *move through struggles*. If we skip the steps required for opening the door in their mind, then the actions they take *won't be connected to what they truly need*. If we skip the steps required for taking action, then they *won't learn how to move forward when hard things happen*. These steps don't always happen in order, and they can also occur across multiple conversations. However, keep in mind that it all starts with *validation*, which is the first step in opening the door for a student to feel safe enough to self-reflect with you.

Something to note is that *it can often look on the surface like a student is getting worse when we encourage this level of deep self-reflection* (e.g., they become more visibly upset, they start articulating more negative thoughts, or they act out in more extreme ways). It's important to remember that this is *part of the learning cycle* and vital in the process of overcoming challenges. *If a student doesn't first recognize that they feel sad about something, they won't know that they need support to help them navigate it*. It's a bit like when we first start exercising. We usually feel tired, frustrated, and generally horrible as our body adjusts, but then eventually we gain strength and enjoy the process of exercise more and more the stronger we get. The self-reflection process is the same—it gets worse before it gets better, but *it does get better*. We just have to be patient.

This can be hard for us as adults, if we were not raised in families who engaged in open reflections about feelings. And even if we were, our culture generally holds the belief that if a child *appears happy on the surface*, we should stay away from triggering topics so as not to disturb their peace. And conversely, we are given the message that if a student appears upset when we are talking to them, then *we must have done the wrong thing* in our approach to supporting them.

However, the opposite is often true. If we avoid this deeper reflection with students, if we stay on the surface and teach students only to “regulate” their emotions rather than really understand their own internal conflicts, we can never truly help them change.

When students are getting into squabbles with classmates, acting in disruptive ways, or becoming overly emotional in class, the most common response we have as adults is to try to help them *calm down their emotions* so they can get back to whatever they are doing and stop disrupting the learning. Sometimes this means we send them to a “calm down corner” or out of the class, and sometimes it means we try to solve their problem (e.g., moving them away from someone they are arguing with) to reduce the emotional trigger. These are all very practical and useful strategies to deal with the tension of the moment. However, if we stop there and don’t also help students reflect on *why they were reacting this way in the first place*, they won’t learn to make more helpful decisions in the way they think, feel, and behave and will simply keep doing the same thing over and over again.

We end up always fighting the same fight over and over again in the classroom. They are stressed and overwhelmed by the workload. Their friend hurt their feelings and they don’t know why. They are unmotivated and pay more attention to their phone than the learning. All of these things you can “snap them out of” or “soothe” as a short-term solution. But not only is this not effective in the long-term, it’s exhausting because these are things you also deal with outside of the classroom with our own families, and this leads to educator burnout. You feel like you are running on a hamster wheel because, really, you are. You are putting out fires again and again because your students aren’t being empowered to see what’s driving their struggles or given the tools to change their patterns. You see the outcome of this playing out again and again, and it’s confusing and distressing.

You can’t be expected to be a therapist or to understand the layers of what is happening for your students. This is not the intent or expectation. What you can do is support them in returning to the truth of who they are by helping them have clarity, feel loved and safe, and find their own courage and identity.

*And the fun part is that everything you learn that will help your students will also help you. These are transferrable skills for everyone involved. One of the most powerful gifts we can give to others is our own self-reflection. The more we understand and face our own challenges, the more we know on a deep level what’s needed to help others.* As you read this book, I encourage you to apply this learning to your own life, and by doing so, bring it off the pages so it becomes real and alive for you. That way you won’t just be learning this information, you will be *living and breathing it*, which means you will effortlessly pass it on to every one of your students.

Throughout this book, you will gain a deep understanding of the mental health struggles that your students face, and hopefully, find ways of relating to your students on an even deeper level as you also reflect on your own life in and outside of the classroom. This information is designed to give you guidance on how you can intervene in simple, effective ways to point your students in the direction of growth, and remember their own strength and power, while protecting and enhancing your own mental health at the same time.

