

# Professional Identity in Mental Health Social Work



**CORE-MH** is a professional identity framework for mental health social work. It aims to articulate *who* mental health social workers are, not just *what* they do, and provides a coherent structure that brings together:

- statutory accountability,
- relational and trauma-informed practice,
- ethical reasoning and professional judgement, and
- multidisciplinary working.

**CORE-MH** does not replace existing professional standards or capability frameworks.

It integrates and animates them in the specific context of mental health social work. At the centre of **CORE-MH** is professional identity. Identity shapes judgement, communication, boundaries, and how power is exercised under pressure.

The framework is organised around five inter-connected anchors:

- **C** - Contextual & Social Lens
- **O** - Obligations & Statutory Purpose
- **R** - Relational & Trauma-Informed Practice
- **E** - Ethical Curiosity & Professional Judgement
- **MH** - Multi-Disciplinary Positioning

These are non-linear and mutually reinforcing.

## C: CONTEXTUAL & SOCIAL LENS

### Seeing the whole picture

#### What this means

Mental health social work begins with an understanding that distress, risk, and need do not exist in isolation. People's experiences are shaped by their relationships, environments, histories, identities, and the systems around them.

A contextual and social lens helps social workers avoid reducing complex lives to symptoms, diagnoses, or behaviours. It keeps the focus on *what is happening around the person*, not just *what is happening within them*. This lens applies equally to:

- adults and families
- children and young people
- carers and networks
- communities and systems

#### Why this matters in mental health practice

Mental health services can unintentionally drift toward individualised or medicalised explanations, particularly under pressure. Social work brings balance by holding:

- social inequality and deprivation
- trauma and loss
- housing, poverty, and exclusion
- discrimination and identity
- community and protective factors

This supports more proportionate, humane, and sustainable decision-making.

#### What this looks like in practice

- Assessments that foreground relationships, environment, and lived experience
- MDT conversations that include social formulation, not just clinical risk
- Curiosity about *why* behaviours make sense in context
- Challenging deficit-based narratives respectfully



## Reflection prompts

- What social, relational, or structural factors most often shape the situations I work with?
- Where do I notice pressure to individualise problems that may be systemic?
- How do I bring social context into MDT discussions in a way that is heard?

# O: OBLIGATIONS & STATUTORY PURPOSE

## *Using authority lawfully and proportionately*

### What this means

Mental health social workers are statutory professionals. This means our role includes making, influencing, and evidencing decisions that carry legal, ethical, and human rights implications.

Statutory literacy is not about memorising legislation. It is about understanding:

- when duties are engaged
- which legal framework applies
- what must be evidenced
- how to act proportionately and lawfully

### Why this matters in mental health practice

Mental health systems often involve urgency, risk anxiety, and competing demands. Without clarity, this can lead to:

- unlawful or over-restrictive interventions
- role drift
- defensive decision-making

Clear statutory purpose protects:

- the person
- the practitioner
- the organisation

### What this looks like in practice

- Confident navigation of Care Act, MCA, and MHA interfaces
- Clear explanations of legal routes in MDT spaces

- Recording that makes decision-making transparent and defensible
- Willingness to pause or challenge when the law is being misapplied

### Reflection prompts

- Which statutory frameworks do I feel most confident using, and which feel less clear?
- How do I explain my statutory role to colleagues from other professions?
- What helps me remain grounded when legal decisions feel pressured?

## R: RELATIONAL & TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

### *How I show up matters*

#### What this means

Mental health social work is relational. How power is used, how conversations are paced, and how people are spoken to all shape outcomes.

Trauma-informed practice recognises that:

- distress affects communication and behaviour
- systems can retraumatise as well as support
- relationships are central to engagement and safety

This applies not only to direct work with people, but also to **how professionals relate to one another**.

#### Why this matters in mental health practice

High-pressure environments can unintentionally escalate distress. Trauma-informed, relational practice helps to:

- reduce conflict and resistance
- support engagement
- maintain dignity and trust
- make proportionate decisions more likely

#### What this looks like in practice

- Attuning to emotional states during assessments

- Using language that reduces threat and shame
- Slowing down conversations when escalation is building
- Bringing a relational lens into MDT communication

### Reflection prompts

- How do I notice trauma showing up in behaviour or communication?
- What helps me stay relational when situations feel tense or urgent?
- How does my communication style influence outcomes?

## E: ETHICAL CURIOSITY & PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT

### *Thinking, not just doing*

#### What this means

Mental health social work often involves uncertainty. Ethical practice is not about having quick answers, but about being willing to:

- question assumptions
- hold complexity
- reflect on power and bias
- think critically about risk

Professional judgement develops through reflection, supervision, and experience.

#### Why this matters in mental health practice

Under pressure, systems can reward certainty and speed over thoughtfulness. Ethical curiosity helps practitioners:

- avoid reactive decision-making
- recognise when anxiety is driving risk responses
- make defensible, proportionate decisions

Supervision becomes a **thinking space**, not just a case-management function.

#### What this looks like in practice

- Naming uncertainty rather than hiding it

- Using supervision to explore dilemmas, not just outcomes
- Reflecting on how personal and professional values influence judgement
- Being open to learning from mistakes

### Reflection prompts

- Where do I notice uncertainty in my role, and how do I respond to it?
- How does supervision support (or limit) my ability to think critically?
- What ethical tensions recur in my practice?

## MH: MULTI-DISCIPLINARY POSITIONING

### *Being distinct without being defensive*

#### What this means

Mental health social work operates within MDTs. Effective practice requires clarity about:

- what social work contributes
- where responsibilities sit
- how boundaries are held collaboratively

Being professionally distinct does not mean working in isolation or competition.

#### Why this matters in mental health practice

Without role clarity:

- social work can become task-driven or diluted
- statutory responsibilities can be overlooked
- practitioners may feel stretched or silenced

Clear positioning supports safer, more balanced decision-making.

#### What this looks like in practice

- Articulating the social work lens clearly and confidently
- Clarifying statutory responsibilities early
- Working collaboratively while maintaining boundaries

- Influencing MDT thinking without hierarchy battles

### Reflection prompts

- How do I usually describe my role in MDT settings?
- Where do I experience role drift or over-functioning?
- What language helps me assert my professional contribution clearly?

## Bringing CORE-MH together

CORE-MH is not a checklist. It is a way of understanding **professional identity in action**. Across contexts, legal frameworks, relationships, ethical dilemmas, and MDT systems, CORE-MH helps mental health social workers remain:

- grounded
- reflective
- lawful
- relational
- clear about who they are and why they matter

### Final reflection

- Which CORE-MH anchor feels most central to my current role?
- Which feels less developed or more challenging?
- How might this framework support my ongoing professional development?

