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IEHA Program Lesson Submission

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Topic Title:	Why Mental Health Matters as We Age
Topic Description: (Information should be researched, educational, approved for use (if you are not the author, seek approval from materials author), and presented in a format that would allow an individual to read, study, and teach to other peers. All copyright issues should be resolved before submission.)	As the global population ages, mental health has become an increasingly important part of overall well-being. This lesson explores why mental health matters as we age and three strategies for supporting good mental health.
Short Goal/Objective Statement for Lesson:	The objective for this lesson is to break the stigma of mental health and identify ways that we can help ourselves and others.

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Why Mental Health Matters as We Age

Leader's Guide

Overview

As people around the world are living longer, mental health is becoming more important as part of aging well. By 2030, about one out of every six people will be age 60 or older. This means more people will face changes that can affect how they feel and cope emotionally. Growing older often brings life changes such as retiring from work, dealing with health issues, losing independence, or grieving the loss of friends and loved ones. All of these experiences can take a toll on mental and emotional well-being.

Mental health in later life includes how people feel, think, and connect with others. It influences how older adults handle stress, make decisions, and stay involved with family and community. When mental health needs are understood and supported, older adults are more likely to maintain independence and a good quality of life. Families, caregivers, and communities play an important role in creating an environment where older adults feel supported and valued.

Mental health is a key part of healthy aging. Many older adults experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, or loneliness, especially during big life changes like retirement, illness, or the loss of a loved one. Emotional well-being is also closely linked to physical health. When people feel mentally well, they are often better able to manage health conditions, stay active, and enjoy daily life.

Mental health conditions are common.

- Many adults struggle with mental health problems, but these challenges are often overlooked. Studies show that about one

in five older adults experience mental health issues that are **not** a normal part of getting older. Even so, nearly two-thirds of older adults who need help never receive it. This is often because of stigma around mental health, limited access to services, or the belief that symptoms like sadness, anxiety, or memory changes are just part of aging.

- Depression is one common concern. About 4% of adults age 70 and older experience depression, yet many older adults assume feeling down, tired, or withdrawn is simply what happens as you age. As a result, they may not talk to a doctor or seek help. This can delay diagnosis and treatment and make symptoms worse over time. These facts show how important it is to raise awareness, encourage mental health screenings, and make it easier for older adults to get the support they need.
 - *Member handout notes:*
 - *1 in 5 older adults experience mental health concerns.*
 - *Depression affects about 4% of adults 70+.*

Untreated mental health issues affect physical health

- When mental health problems are not treated, they can lead to serious issues with physical health, memory, and daily independence. Untreated mental illness can make it harder for someone to care for themselves, increase disability, affect thinking and memory, raise the risk of substance misuse, and even increase the risk of early death, including suicide. These effects can greatly reduce quality of life for older adults.
- Mental health problems like depression can also make existing health conditions worse. Nearly all older adults live with at least one chronic illness, such as diabetes or heart disease. When mental health issues are present, managing these conditions becomes more difficult. Poor mental health can lower motivation to take medications, eat well, exercise, or attend medical appointments.

- At the same time, living with long-term health problems can increase feelings of sadness, stress, and anxiety. This creates a cycle where physical illness and poor mental health feed into each other. Because of this strong connection, addressing mental health early and consistently is an important part of helping older adults stay healthy, independent, and engaged in their daily lives.
 - *Member handout notes:*
 - *Can increase disability, cognitive decline, and poor quality of life.*

Isolation increases risk

- Feeling lonely or cut off from others is one of the biggest risk factors for mental health problems in older adults. As people get older, many experience changes that reduce social connections, such as losing a spouse or friends, retiring from work, or having trouble getting around. Physical pain, fear of falling, or feeling less independent can also make it harder to leave the house or take part in activities, which can lead to even more isolation.
- When older adults become less active and more isolated, it can create a harmful cycle. Loneliness can lead to sadness or depression, which then causes people to withdraw even further from social activities. This lack of connection often affects physical health as well, making existing health problems worse and reducing overall quality of life.
- Staying socially connected is an important part of healthy aging. Regular social interaction—whether with family, friends, neighbors, or community groups—helps older adults feel supported, maintain emotional strength, and enjoy a better quality of life as they age.
 - *Member handout notes:*
 - *Loneliness and social isolation are major risk factors for mental illness.*

3 Ways to Support Mental Health as We Age

One simple and effective way to support mental health is by staying connected with other people. Spending time with friends, talking with family, joining local activities, or even using phone or video calls can lift your mood and reduce feelings of loneliness. Staying socially active helps remind you that you matter and that you are part of a community.

Another helpful step is keeping your body moving and sticking to healthy daily habits. Light activities like walking, stretching, gardening, or attending a gentle exercise class can improve energy levels and boost your mood. Staying active also helps keep your mind sharp. Eating well, getting enough sleep, and doing things that keep your brain engaged—like reading, puzzles, or hobbies—can make a big difference in how you feel each day.

Finally, it's important to talk with a doctor or healthcare provider if you notice changes in your mood, sleep, appetite, or energy. Feeling sad, anxious, or withdrawn is not just "part of getting older." Many mental health concerns can be treated, and getting help early can greatly improve quality of life. With the right care and support, older adults can feel better and enjoy daily life again.

Stay Connected

- Having strong relationships and staying connected with others is very important for mental health. Older adults are encouraged to stay involved with friends, family, neighbors, community groups, or faith organizations because these connections provide emotional support and help reduce feelings of loneliness. Being connected also gives people a sense of purpose and belonging.

- You don't have to be busy all the time for these connections to make a difference. Even small efforts—like joining a club, going to a weekly class, or chatting with someone over the phone or on a video call—can lift your mood and lower the risk of feeling depressed or anxious. Staying socially involved helps older adults stay emotionally strong and enjoy a better quality of life as they age.
 - *Member handout notes:*
 - *Keep in touch with family and friends.*
 - *Participate in social or community activities.*

Stay Active

- Being physically active is good for both your body and your mind. Even gentle activities like walking, stretching, or light exercise can help improve your mood, keep your mind sharp, and support independence as you age. Staying active can help you feel more energetic and confident in your daily life.
- Having regular, healthy routines also makes a big difference. Getting enough sleep, eating balanced meals, and doing activities that challenge your brain—such as reading, puzzles, or learning something new—can help keep your emotions steady and your energy levels up. Together, these healthy habits support overall well-being and can help lower the risk of depression and anxiety as people get older.
 - *Member handout notes:*
 - *Move daily—walking, stretching, balance exercises.*
 - *Keep your mind active with reading, games, or learning.*

Talk to a Health Care Provider

- Noticing mental health concerns early and taking action can make a big difference. Older adults should talk with a doctor or healthcare provider if they notice changes in their mood, energy level, sleep habits, or behavior. Feeling unusually sad, tired, irritable, or withdrawn is not something that should be ignored.

- Mental health conditions like depression can be treated at any age, and getting help early often leads to better results. Support can include counseling, medication, social support, or other medical care. Unfortunately, depression in older adults is often missed or brushed aside.
- Encouraging regular mental health check-ins helps make sure concerns are noticed and addressed instead of overlooked. With the right support, older adults can feel better and maintain a higher quality of life.
 - *Member handout notes:*
 - *Share changes in mood, sleep, or energy.*
 - *Depression and anxiety are treatable at any age.*

Discussion Questions

- What helps you feel connected to others?
- What small habit could you start to improve your mental health this week?
- Who can you talk to if you notice a change in your mood or energy?

The 2025-2027 National Volunteer Outreach Network Project in Common is: Break the Stigma, Ignite Hope, Mental Health Matters. More can be found about the project on this [page](#), which has links to several sites that can provide additional resources for mental health awareness and support ideas.

Resources

University of Utah Health, Department of Psychiatry. (n.d.). *Mental health & aging facts*. <https://medicine.utah.edu/psychiatry/clinics/geriatric-psychiatry/facts>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, September 3). *Depression and aging*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-aging/about/depression-aging.html>

National Council on Aging. (n.d.). *7 ways older adults can manage their mental health*. <https://www.ncoa.org/article/7-ways-older-adults-can-manage-their-mental-health/>

National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.). *Older adults and mental health*. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/older-adults-and-mental-health>

World Health Organization. (2025, October 8). *Mental health of older adults*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-of-older-adults>

Why Mental Health Matters as We Age

Member Handout

Overview

As people around the world are living longer, mental health is becoming more important as part of aging well. By 2030, about one out of every six people will be age 60 or older. This means more people will face changes that can affect how they feel and cope emotionally. Growing older often brings life changes such as retiring from work, dealing with health issues, losing independence, or grieving the loss of friends and loved ones. All of these experiences can take a toll on mental and emotional well-being.

Mental health in later life includes how people feel, think, and connect with others. It influences how older adults handle stress, make decisions, and stay involved with family and community. When mental health needs are understood and supported, older adults are more likely to maintain independence and a good quality of life. Families, caregivers, and communities play an important role in creating an environment where older adults feel supported and valued.

- **Mental health conditions are common**
 - 1 in 5 older adults experience mental health concerns.
 - Depression affects about 4% of adults 70+.
- **Untreated mental health issues affect physical health**
 - Can increase disability, cognitive decline, and poor quality of life.
- **Isolation increases risk**
 - Loneliness and social isolation are major risk factors for mental illness.

3 Ways to Support Mental Health as We Age

One simple and effective way to support mental health is by staying connected with other people. Spending time with friends, talking with family, joining local activities, or even using phone or video calls can lift your mood and reduce feelings of loneliness. Another helpful step is keeping your body moving and sticking to healthy daily habits. Getting enough sleep, eating nutritious meals, and keeping your mind stimulated can also help you feel better day-to-day. Finally, it's important to talk with a doctor or healthcare provider if you notice changes in your mood, sleep, appetite, or energy. Centers for Disease Control stresses that older adults can recover from depression when they receive proper care.

- **Stay Connected**
 - Keep in touch with family and friends.
 - Participate in social or community activities.
- **Stay Active**
 - Move daily—walking, stretching, balance exercises.
 - Keep your mind active with reading, games, or learning.
- **Talk to a Health Care Provider**
 - Share changes in mood, sleep, or energy.
 - Depression and anxiety are treatable at any age.

Discussion Questions

- What helps you feel connected to others?
- What small habit could you start to improve your mental health this week?
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