

Adult Mental Health in Education: Examining the Needs of Today's Adult Learner

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According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), one in five adults living in the United States has a mental illness (2022). The term “mental illness” accounts for a vast number of conditions, all of which differ in the level of impact on an individual. Furthermore, a study from NIMH (2022) estimates that only 43% of individuals with a mental illness receive treatment. With such a high frequency of adults knowingly and unknowingly being adversely impacted by mental health disorders, there is a strong likelihood that if you are an adult facilitator, you have students struggling with mental health.

Despite the varying complexities and diagnoses associated with students who are navigating mental health issues, there are numerous approaches educators and professionals supporting adult learners can take to help students cope with mental health needs. However, to truly understand the purpose of the supports and accommodations we will discuss, it is important to understand firstly what mental health is and how it relates to andragogy or adult education practices. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) defines mental health as including our emotional, psychological, and social well-being and how those factors influence

how we think, feel and act. Additionally, unlike children, many adults prefer their learning to be self-directed, clearly relevant to their learning needs, and presented in a way that is respectful of their current knowledge and experience (Knowles, 1977). Moving forward, it is essential to note that whether an adult has mental health needs or not, providing specific accommodations to address adults impacted by mental health diagnoses can benefit all learners.

The following resources and accommodations discussing best practices for students with mental health needs are adapted using Hewitt's (2017) *Yes I Can: A Mental Health Guide for Adult Literacy Facilitators*. The information below accounts for the most common student needs and ways for facilitators to incorporate best practices into their classrooms that can address various diverse learning requirements. For more detailed information on specific mental health disorders, including how certain disorders present, impact the learning environment, and what facilitators can do to support students, readers are encouraged to reference Hewitt's (2017) work.

The first step in supporting adult students with mental health needs is to develop an inclusive classroom that is welcoming for all students

regardless of whether they have mental health difficulties. Many individuals diagnosed with a mental health need have faced stigmas surrounding their condition and have learned to mask or hide the symptoms associated with their disorder. As a result of hiding their disorder, many students do not know the skills necessary to become self-advocates for their learning needs. Self-advocacy is the student's ability to ask directly for what they need to be successful in the learning environment. For example, students might need copies of lecture slides or extended time during testing. With guidance and openness from educators, students can learn to feel empowered when it comes to self-advocating for the accommodations they require and understand that there is no shame in requesting the resources necessary for their success. Students with mental health needs can benefit from becoming powerful self-advocates and experiencing teachers who are receptive and open to their requests. Helping students become self-advocates can include:

- Creating an environment where students feel safe to take chances
- Feel confident in asking for what they need
- Experience flexibility in communication, environment, and scheduling

In addition to students becoming empowered self-advocates, educators can also build accommodating practices for students with mental health needs that can benefit all learners. Accommodations can include:

- Providing students with options and time to process the various options (e.g., a final assignment with different options for completion)
- Flexible seating options (i.e., standing desks, tables, couches)

- Providing students with a way to give feedback on their learning preferences in a positive way (e.g., "I do best when...")

The learning environment also requires critical attention when examining different approaches for supporting learners with mental health needs. The learning environment must be flexible and adapted for optimal learning conditions. Attention to simple things such as lighting, clutter, and even wall color affects educators' and students' attitudes and approaches to learning. The environment can play a significant part in teaching individuals with mental health needs. Efforts to decrease sensory or auditory stimuli can go a long way with students who struggle with anxiety and stress-related disorders. However, providing students with a positive and supportive learning environment can be beneficial in decreasing sensitivities surrounding social interactions. It is important to note that some students with mental health needs may have more difficulty with (a) sitting for extended periods, (b) being still or refraining from fidgeting, and (c) working silently or without support. Since students with mental health needs can sometimes be distracting for other learners, it is important to speak with students needing additional accommodations and decide what strategies can help address any specific concerns. Efforts to raise mental health awareness overall in the classroom may also aid others in increasing their tolerance and understanding of the particular learning needs of others.

In addition to addressing the learning environment, educators can support students with mental health needs using various general learning strategies. Students with different mental health diagnoses typically face overlapping challenges. As a result, there are common strategies that have the potential to benefit all learners with mental health needs positively.

The strategies highlighted below are not all-encompassing for all students with mental health disorders but is a good place to start when looking for support to meet student needs.

Students coping with anxiety or depression may face fatigue or decreased motivation. If educators notice a student's lack of motivation or energy, consider implementing short tasks at the start of class to help the student succeed. Seating students impacted by fatigue in a brightly lit area in the center of instruction can also be helpful for student engagement. Incorporating a class structure that incorporates breaks and includes a variety of activities can aid students in staying alert throughout the class. In settings where food and drink are permitted, allowing students to have access to snacks can help students stay awake. Flexibility with reduced homework and extended deadlines can be helpful when needed. Fidgets or sensory tools are also excellent for assisting students with class engagement.

Some students may be experiencing increased anxiety or stress due to their mental health needs and may benefit from frequent check-ins with the facilitator to let them know they are on the right track. Other students may require more concrete executive functioning support, such as a calendar breakdown of when to complete readings or start working on specific class assignments. Incorporating relaxation techniques and flexibility surrounding mistakes will also help students feel at ease. When possible, the facilitator should share stories about their academic challenges and how mistakes have been part of their learning process. Positively providing feedback can also help decrease stress and anxiety surrounding academic difficulties.

The ability to focus or concentrate for an extended period can be a side effect of several mental

health diagnoses. Incorporating mindfulness practices or discussing ideal body positioning (i.e., relaxed shoulders, feet flat on the floor) can be helpful for students struggling to focus. Minimizing items that make noise and using cell phones or other distracting devices may also benefit students struggling to concentrate. Breaking work into definable chunks or presenting lessons in a way that asks students to respond actively (i.e., writing on the board, drawing on their notes, verbally responding, etc.) can also help maintain engagement and concentration on the task presented.

Some students may struggle with executive functioning concerns due to their mental health diagnosis. For students having difficulty with executive functioning, try the following:

- Provide a class calendar or schedule handout to remind learners of class times
- Begin each day with a review of the day's schedule
- Suggest different systems for note-taking and organization of class materials
- When presenting upcoming assignments, suggest different time management strategies
- Discuss setting priorities associated with classwork and assignments
- Suggest different types of apps that could be useful for organizing and maintaining assignment schedules
- Provide several minutes at the end of each class for students to organize their materials

Impaired memory is a common symptom of several mental health diagnoses, especially mental health needs related to past traumas. Providing students with impacted memory with short and structured tasks can help minimize frustration and help with retention. For example, some students may benefit

from checklists or assignments broken down into small definable chunks to avoid confusion. When providing direct instruction, facilitators should present the main points first and structure their delivery to invite learners to respond actively (i.e., come up to the board or answer aloud). Flexibility with assessments can be helpful for students with memory recall issues; verbal assessments may be beneficial for some students who become overwhelmed by paper and pencil tasks, and it can be helpful to have the opportunity to think aloud. Checking for understanding by having students repeat instructions back can help ensure students understand the directions and are transparent on the next steps. As a facilitator, it may be helpful to informally assess how much information a learner can retain at one time and then plan assignments and assessments with the limitations of the learner in mind.

Additionally, incorporating memorization tools, such as mind maps and mnemonic devices, into a lesson may help support the memorization and retention of class material. Massed and disturbed practices of memory retention may also be helpful for students. Massed practices have the student memorize information until they know it, whereas disturbed practices have students work on memorizing information in timed chunks. Teaching students to identify keywords within a text by highlighting or underlining important information can help them identify and remember information. Additionally, the use of multiple-choice assessments can be helpful for students who struggle to memorize enough information to compose a short answer or essay response.

Students with mental health needs related to trauma may experience difficulty with perfectionism or self-criticism and benefit from having the facilitator validate their feelings and guide them toward strategies that can

relieve some of the added pressure they place on themselves. Reminding students of past successes or achievements can be helpful in their understanding that they are doing well or have mastered past concepts. Checking in frequently with students to let them know they are on the right track and offering encouragement can go a long way in easing any doubt the student may be feeling. Sharing with students that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and the power of mindsets can help shift how students view their progress. Creating an environment where mistakes are celebrated and seen as learning opportunities can also assist students struggling with self-criticism and help them realize that mistakes are just part of the learning process. Being open with students about the purpose of constructive feedback and how it is a process to learn and improve can help minimize any feelings students may experience in seeing feedback as unfavorable or a poor reflection of them as learners. Maintaining a positive and supportive learning environment will be critical in minimizing any pessimism or self-doubt students may feel as a result of any past traumas or mental health conditions.

In some extreme instances, students with mental health needs may experience behavioral impacts that lead to high levels of frustration or anger. Students experiencing concerns associated with emotional regulation may require flexibility with exposure to content that may be triggering or upsetting. To know what information may be an issue for a student, it is essential to establish genuine connections that allow the student to feel comfortable with the facilitator and can lead to opportunities for them to be open about past experiences. Additional supports such as flexibility in the student's ability to switch tasks when needed and the reduction of competitive assignments can also be helpful for students working to maintain their self-

regulation. Transparency with grading and how feedback will occur can also eliminate any confusion and frustration related to classroom expectations. Incorporating positive messages with constructive feedback can help eliminate any negative messages the student may be interpreting and assist in keeping strong emotions at bay. Allowing students to recognize when their feelings are getting the best of them and providing opportunities for short breaks can also be a helpful strategy for students working to regulate their emotions. Ultimately, it is essential not to take any of the students' words or behaviors personally, understanding that some of the emotional reaction is out of their control, and continuing to provide a supportive and welcoming environment will be critical to the student's success.

Difficulty with being on time or significant absences may be common for some students with mental health needs, and students might require flexibility due to their unique mental health diagnosis. Speaking with students about their absences and inquiring if anything specific is keeping them from attending class can be helpful in understanding any underlying issues or concerns that may be preventing them from attending. Despite any ongoing mental health needs, it will be important to set clear expectations related to class attendance. The use of technology tools, such as apps that help push out class and assignment reminders to students, can help students who may be struggling with attendance or punctuality. Taking the time to build positive student relationships can also assist in removing any feelings of shame associated with attendance concerns and create open lines of communication.

Finally, some students may experience intense side effects related to medication and would benefit from the flexibility to leave the classroom when needed to access the bathroom, eat a snack, or

access water. Opportunities for frequent breaks can help combat fatigue or brain fog associated with medication side effects. If medication side effects become increasingly impactful, consideration of a modified class schedule or opportunities for the student to work on class assignments at home when appropriate should occur.

When examining which strategies will be the most impactful in the classroom, it is essential to consider that not all adult students have a mental health diagnosis and, as a result, will not have any information to disclose. Additionally, some students may not choose to disclose their diagnoses. Whether a student has a mental health diagnosis or chooses not to disclose it if they do, the accommodations in this article can still be implemented as best classroom practices or as individualized support for specific students you observe requiring additional aid. However, when students disclose information concerning a mental health diagnosis, consider conversing with them regarding potential strategies that work best for them as learners. Including students in the conversation surrounding the methods available to them in the classroom is not to eradicate problems the student may face in the education setting but is to build resilience and the perseverance necessary to attend class and complete the required assignments. Helping students find success can benefit their growth and development as learners. Adult educators are not responsible for diagnosing a mental health need but can use symptoms shared by the student to determine the most appropriate strategy to utilize for optimal success. Regardless of a student's mental health needs, facilitators should familiarize themselves with what mental health is and how it can manifest in a classroom setting. Understanding student needs is the first step in recognizing and understanding the best approach to assist students impacted by mental health.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *About mental health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>

Hewitt, J.E. (2017). *Yes I can: A mental health guide for adult literacy facilitators*. LINC. <http://www.projectread.ca/pdf/MentalHealthGuide2017.pdf>

Knowles, M. (1977). Adult learning processes: Pedagogy and andragogy. *Religious Education*, 72(2), 202-211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408770720210>

National Institute of Mental Health. (2022). *Mental illness*. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>