



## ***SOUTH CAROLINA FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEADERS***

Affiliated with National Volunteer Outreach Network, Country Women's Council, U.S.A., Associated Country Women of the World and in partnership with Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service  
SCFCL website: <http://www.scfcl.com>

### **Leader Training Guide**

#### **Rethink Positive Mental Acuity**

#### **Objectives:**

1. Educate leaders on the cognitive and mental health changes associated with aging.
2. Equip leaders with evidence-based knowledge of mental health challenges affecting older adults.
3. Connect participants with community, local, and state resources that support the self-management of mental acuity and promote mental well-being among aging populations.

#### **Lesson Overview/Introduction:**

**Each year, one in five adults in the United States experiences a mental health crisis.** This training is designed to empower both caregivers and individuals who may be at risk of cognitive decline associated with aging. As people grow older, they often face changes in memory, recall, and overall cognitive function—challenges that can impact their independence and quality of life.

This program introduces practical strategies to support mental well-being, enhance daily functioning, and foster a sense of control and confidence in managing age-related changes.

#### **Lesson Summary:**

This training offers information and activities focused on mental health support and prevention strategies. Participants will gain practical skills to assist individuals facing mental health challenges, while also equipping community leaders and caregivers with effective tools and coping techniques for responsive support.

The lesson underscores the importance of promoting positive health behaviors and overall well-being to enhance long-term cognitive function and memory retention. Participants will examine how lifestyle factors—such as nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and social engagement—impact cognitive longevity, and how intentional daily practices can help reduce the risk of dementia and other mental health conditions.

In addition, the lesson highlights the vital role of mental stimulation and recollection activities in healthy aging, encouraging their integration into daily routines. The program also introduces public health strategies that improve mental health outcomes through education, community engagement, and the adoption of evidence-based interventions.

## Lesson:

As individuals age, cognitive functioning can decline due to a combination of physiological, social, and environmental factors. To support healthy aging, positive self-care practices and accessible resources play a vital role in promoting longevity, enhancing cognitive abilities, and fostering self-efficacy among older adults.

**Mental acuity** refers to the sharpness of one's ability to think clearly, focus, and make sound decisions. While aging naturally contributes to changes in mental acuity, lifestyle factors—such as consistent social engagement, mental stimulation, and physical activity—can significantly reduce the impact of cognitive decline.

It is important to distinguish mental acuity from **intelligence**: mental acuity involves the recollection and application of cognitive behaviors, whereas intelligence is the capacity to acquire knowledge and solve problems.

This lesson explores the importance of positive mental health practices in aging populations. It emphasizes how health equity, well-being, and access to supportive resources—such as quality healthcare and community-based programs—can influence cognitive health and overall quality of life in later years.

How can we maintain and improve our mental acuity?

### 1. Physical activity

According to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, adults are encouraged to engage in at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week. This goal can be achieved through short intervals of exercise, incorporating a mix of cardiovascular and resistance-based activities.

Regular physical activity has a profound impact on brain health — it improves memory, enhances cognitive function, and promotes greater mental clarity. In addition, consistent exercise helps reduce stress levels, which in turn supports better focus, emotional regulation, and overall mental well-being.

### 2. Nutrition

A balanced diet that includes fiber, healthy fats, essential vitamins, and minerals supports chemical balance in the brain and helps reduce inflammation—both of which contribute to positive mental health. The USDA's **MyPlate** guidelines provide daily recommendations for a well-rounded diet. For more details on recommended food selections, visit [MyPlate.gov](https://www.myplate.gov).

In addition to following established nutritional guidelines, it is recommended to limit or eliminate alcohol and recreational drug use, as these substances can increase the risk of cognitive decline over time. Supporting brain health through proper nutrition is essential—incorporating vitamin B12 into the diet, for example, can aid in maintaining mental acuity and promoting overall cognitive function as individuals age.

### **3. Intellectual Activity**

Engaging in intellectual activities can help maintain and enhance key cognitive functions such as perception, mental rotation, working memory, and reasoning. Activities like puzzles, chess, checkers, and crossword puzzles are excellent tools for stimulating the brain and promoting mental agility.

Equally important is adequate rest. The brain requires 6 to 8 hours of quality sleep each night to function optimally. A lack of sleep can impair reaction time, concentration, and overall cognitive performance, highlighting the critical role of rest in supporting mental health and cognitive longevity.

### **4. Spiritual/Social Activity**

Deep breathing exercises, along with other coping strategies, are effective tools for enhancing focus and mental clarity. Maintaining focus is essential for retaining the ability to think critically and make rational decisions, especially under stress.

## **Breaking the barriers**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), health equity is defined as the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health. However, achieving health equity continues to be a significant challenge—particularly for vulnerable populations such as women, children, veterans, individuals with disabilities, and older adults.

To address health equity, it is crucial to first identify and understand the disparities these groups face in their daily lives. For example, adults living in rural areas often encounter limited access to healthcare services, social support systems, nutritious food, quality education, and financial stability. These systemic barriers increase the likelihood of health disadvantages, including a higher risk of cognitive decline and reduced mental acuity.

## **A future glance**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed a strategic plan focused on promoting overall well-being and improving equitable access to support services and opportunities. Central to this initiative is ensuring that individuals in at-risk situations have the resources they need to thrive. The plan places particular emphasis on the role of physical health and the social determinants of health in shaping mental well-being throughout the lifespan.

Another key advocate for mental health is the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, which offers programs to equip individuals with the tools to recognize, address, and recover from mental health challenges — including how to seek help in crisis situations. According to the Council, approximately 46% of the U.S. population will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives. This statistic underscores the importance of initiatives like Mental Health First Aid, a community-based program that educates and empowers people to respond effectively to mental health concerns.

Fortunately, programs like Mental Health First Aid have shown promising results—reducing long-term mental health challenges and improving recovery outcomes for many individuals across the country.

### **Lesson summary:**

The lesson highlights the importance of mental acuity and health equity in aging adults. Mental acuity can be preserved by reducing the risks of cognitive decline through regular engagement in physical and social activities, mental stimulation, and effective resource navigation. Promoting equitable access to healthcare and community resources is essential, particularly for vulnerable populations, to support overall well-being and maintain cognitive health as individuals age.

### **Suggested Activities:**

Activity 1: Engage in an interactive BINGO or card game at your local community center.

- Test your ability to challenge your mind among a group of peers. If there is any difficulty in your ability to recall what you would normally find easy or manageable information, please inform your primary care provider of the inability to recall any information or decrease in response times you notice.
- Community recreation centers can be found here [South Carolina Department on Aging \(SCDOA\)](#)
- If participants do not have transportation, a word search puzzle is a great alternative to exercising mental recollection.

Activity 2: Ask for responses to questions.

When is your date of birth?

What is your current address?

How many months are there in a year?

Activity 3:

Play some relaxing music and read an article/or a favorite chapter in a novel. See how much of the article you are able to summarize. This activity will assist in the identification of the ability to retain focus, increase memorization, and promote empowerment. Note that if the participant has any auditory disabilities, please refrain from using this activity.

### **Suggested Materials:**

Free online games can be found here: [Online Word Search for Seniors - Free Games - AMAC](#)

Free printable word searches can be found here: [Free Printable Word Search Puzzle Games](#)

For community medical resources [Homepage \(New\) | SCDHHS](#)

MyPlate resources [www.myplate.gov](http://www.myplate.gov)

South Carolina Department of Aging Resources <http://aging.sc.gov>

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