



How and Why Does Intellectual Wellness Relate to Mental Health?

Intellectual wellness includes the discovery and development of skills and the expression of thoughts and feelings with others. For individuals with mental health conditions, growing intellectual wellness can benefit health and well-being. According to several sources, including the National Institute on Aging, many factors can have a negative impact on memory and cognitive ability, including various medical conditions, like blood clots; mental health, especially depression; brain injury; reactions to medications; alcohol; and lack of a nutritional diet, among others.¹ Providers can help the individuals they serve to avoid or lessen these negative factors.

What is the Intellectual Dimension of Wellness?

Intellectual wellness involves lifelong learning, application of knowledge learned, and sharing knowledge. We need to recognize people's creative abilities and help individuals to find ways to expand their knowledge and skills while at the same time helping them to discover the potential for sharing these gifts with others. Services and supports should help people to pursue a personal interest and keep up to date on issues, as well as offering opportunities to share ideas.²

Strategies for Enhancing Intellectual Wellness

Supported Education

Supported education provides access to safe learning environments with diverse interpersonal, cultural, and social experiences. It also provides opportunities for individuals served to develop interests and skills—which can shape personal identity—and attain training or earn degrees that can lead to further opportunities.³ Research on a number of different supported education models provides evidence of effectiveness related to participant satisfaction, decreased hospitalization, improved quality of life, and increased competitive employment among participants.⁴

Supported education can enhance both occupational and intellectual wellness for individuals with mental health conditions. For providers, it is helpful to know about and link people served to volunteer and supported education opportunities. This opportunity can support those who may have otherwise dropped out of school, offering resources and assistance to maintain enrollment.

Health Literacy

“Health literacy is a necessary skill for understanding health conditions, communicating with health providers, managing or preventing illness, using health treatment, ensuring safety during health treatment (e.g., understanding medication dosing instructions), and doing all of these things for the people and creatures whom we care for (e.g., our children and pets).”⁵ Approximately 36 percent of U.S. adults have low health literacy, and individuals with serious mental illness are more likely to have limited health literacy.⁶ Providers should consider strategies for assessing and growing health literacy for individuals served. Keeping limited literacy and numeracy levels in mind is essential for making sure health information is written and verbally shared in terms that are easily understood.

Journaling

Journaling has been shown to positively impact the well-being of individuals with eating disorders, bipolar disorder, depression, attention-deficit disorders, and schizophrenia. Journaling also enhances healthy processing of emotions; self-discovery, creativity, and expression; stress reduction; as well as problem-solving and conflict resolution.⁷ Providers can encourage individuals to record their thoughts and ideas in a journal. This may lead to positive intellectual wellness benefits.

Art Therapy

Art therapy can enhance intellectual wellness by supporting self-discovery, expression, and growth. Art therapy has been shown to decrease symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma; and may help reduce stress.⁸ Whether at home or as part of a health intervention, providers can offer art therapy and then help people to engage in art activities as part of lifestyle routines. Art therapy may help a person to develop or rekindle hobbies or leisure activities that allow for the expression of creativity and use of skills and abilities.

Improve Physical Health through Intellectual Wellness

Taking into account that an estimated 80 percent of people with serious mental illnesses are overweight or obese,⁹ a focus on physical health is particularly important. Providers can work with individuals served to explore activities that promote intellectual and physical wellness, like:

- **Cooking**—Studies show that people who often cook meals eat healthier at home compared to people who cook less or not at all¹⁰

- Dancing—Dancing supports the mind-body connection; and “intellectual wellness embraces challenging the mind through dance practice, stimulating creativity, and identifying potential problems”¹¹
- Playing sports—Studies show that playing sports can reduce stress and promote well-being; participation in team sports is linked to better health outcomes as compared to individual sports because of the social component, supporting social wellness¹²

Whether done at home, in a treatment program, or a community setting, providers can suggest people get involved in activities, such as cooking, dancing, and sports, as they all can positively impact both the intellectual and physical wellness of the individuals served.

Interpersonal Relationships and Intellectual Wellness

School, work, volunteer, and community activities present opportunities for individuals with mental health conditions to be part of larger social networks, linking intellectual wellness to social wellness. Social networks can increase access to, as well as the variety of, available social supports. When around other people, they can provide feedback resulting in positive emotional states, including a sense of purpose, belonging, and safety.¹³ Providers can encourage the individuals they work with to join social circles where others are sharing knowledge and learning from one another, like attending local cultural activities or going to a local library. These are free or low-cost ways to strengthen interpersonal relationships and foster intellectual wellness.

Expanding Potential for Sharing with Others

Patient Activation and Cultural Activation

Patient activation “or having the knowledge, skills, and confidence to manage one’s health...is strongly related to a broad range of health-related outcomes.”¹⁴ Cultural activation is defined as an individual’s “recognition of the importance of providing cultural information to providers about cultural affiliations, challenges, views about, and attitudes toward behavioral health and general medical health care, as well as the consumer’s confidence in his or her ability to provide this information.”¹⁵ Providers can encourage individuals with mental health conditions to become activated: Providers can suggest people record their ideas and share questions and thoughts about their recovery, treatment, or other well-being needs with care providers and social supports. Providers should encourage people to ask questions, understanding that “cultural information is critical to appropriate diagnosis and treatment and recovery planning.”¹⁶ These opportunities for both patient and cultural activation can strengthen one’s participation in their treatment and recovery. This may help expand intellectual wellness, creating opportunities for learning and expressing ideas.



Remember: the wellness approach to recovery offers a holistic framework in which people are viewed as whole human beings.¹⁷ Whether working toward effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, or service delivery, keep the Eight Dimensions of Wellness and the value of intellectual wellness in mind when serving individuals with mental health conditions.

Relevant Resources

[Creating a Healthier Life Handbook](#) | Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

[SAMHSA Supported Education Evidence-based Practices KIT](#) | SAMHSA

[Wellness Activity Lessons](#) | Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey

[Signs and of Intellectual Wellness](#) | University of New Hampshire Health Services

[edX Online Courses](#) | Harvard University and Partners

[U.S. Department of Education](#)

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Endnotes

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