

# "Bag of Rocks": A Story to Help Address Mental Health with ELLs

## Purpose

To present a lesson and story called "Bag of Rocks" that can help address stress and mental health with ELLs.

## Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on our mental health, including that of adult students. More than ever, we are experiencing anxiety, depression, and higher levels of stress.

For ELLs, the added burden of mental health challenges can feel even heavier as they may not be able to fully express what they are feeling in English, or they may not know how or where to find help in their native language. They also may have differing cultural perspectives on if or when to seek help for mental health or stress. Finding insurance for mental health can also be a challenge.

English-language instructors and adult educators in general are not fully equipped to address mental health concerns. Tackling these topics can veer into sensitive territory that students may not wish to share. However, there are ways instructors can broach the topic of mental health and share resources, that can make students feel less alone.

The activity shared here is a modified version of a lesson from the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center Health Literacy (VALRC) Toolkit. Called "Bag of Rocks Lesson," it is geared toward ELLs. However, you may find it helpful in other class settings as well. You could incorporate the lesson into any class time related to health.

Find a link to the full lesson and story on the next page. This modified lesson is used with permission from the VALRC.



## More About VALRC's Health Literacy Toolkit

The VALRC Health Literacy Toolkit is designed for educators of ELLs and others interested in health care communication with ELLs.

The toolkit includes reproducible lesson plans and teaching materials on high-interest, hard-to-teach health topics. It also has easy-to-read resources on using the U.S. health care system. Some of the information is geared toward programs to help them create their own health literacy curricula. Here are a few helpful links from the toolkit:

### Health Literacy Toolkit Overview

<https://tinyurl.com/2d3439bm>

### Medication List Form

<https://tinyurl.com/s39dxuuk>

### ESOL Healthcare Tips

<https://tinyurl.com/bdd2ke2x>

### Medical History Form

<https://tinyurl.com/yfk3wwd4>

## WHAT IS COUNSELING? *(Note: The text below is part of the lesson on the next page.)*

Some students may not know what counseling is. You can let them know that talking with another person about their "heavy rocks" can be helpful. Counseling lets you talk with a professional to help work through any stress. Here is more information about counseling that you can share, courtesy of the VALRC curriculum:

- In the U.S., we have counselors or social workers who can help you with difficult things from your past or stress in your life.
- Sometimes, talking with a counselor can help you not to feel alone.
- A counselor is a safe person to talk with about things from your past that you are "carrying" with you.
- A counselor can help you deal with problems you are experiencing in the U.S.
- It is important to choose an interpreter you trust if counseling isn't available in your language.

## More Information on Mental Health Resources

### MentalHealth.gov

<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/>

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' MentalHealth.gov website includes basic information on mental health disorders, signs and symptoms, and where to find help.

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

By calling 9-8-8 or 1-800-273-8255, callers to the Lifeline receive free and confidential support and crisis resources.

### SAMHSA Behavioral Health Spanish-Language Resources

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/spanish-language-resources-obhe-10202020.pdf>

Find phone numbers and web links to various behavioral health resources and hotlines available in Spanish. This list is from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

### "Yes I Can: A Mental Health Guide for Adult Literacy Facilitators"

<https://projectread.ca/pdf/MentalHealthGuide2017.pdf>

Written by Jennifer Hewitt with support from Canada's Project Read, this 999-page guide is chock full of information that can help you address mental health with students. Because of the guide's large size, you may want to browse the table of contents to find the information that would be most useful for you or your students.

## The Basic Activity

1. **Have a copy of the "Bag of Rocks" story available for students as well as the Discussion Questions (see pages 5 and 6 of this issue). The full lesson is available at the following link:** <https://tinyurl.com/2ka7tvnt>
  2. **Before class, gather some mental health, social service, or refugee resources for students.** You can share this information on a handout or electronically. Your program may have names and contact information for such programs locally. The sidebar on this page shares some resources available on a national level.
  3. **Provide a copy of the "Bag of Rocks" story to students.** Ask them to look at the title and picture and guess what the story is about. You can also start an initial conversation about what types of stress students may experience.
  4. **Read and review the story as you normally do with students.** Encourage students to circle any new words. Discuss any new vocabulary.
  5. **Facilitate a discussion about "Bag of Rocks" using the Discussion Questions on page 6.** Here are a few notes to consider as students answer questions:
    - For questions 1 and 2, students who wish to volunteer their replies can do so.
    - For question 3, keep in mind that students may perceive a big or small "rock" differently. This is normal.
    - For question 4, have learners work alone or in pairs to use the chart and write down things that have been stressful in the U.S. Discuss answers.
    - Similarly, for question 5, have learners use the chart to write down things that make them feel hopeful. Discuss answers.
    - The goal of question 6 is to make a connection between stress and its physical and emotional consequences. Have students work with a partner or collaborate as a class to answer the questions. If counseling is not mentioned, you can bring it up and share any organizations from your resource list where students may find free or low-cost counseling (see box on page 3 to help explain counseling). On a side note, you may want to let students know that counseling is available virtually.
- As you work on question 6b, you can use it as a springboard to share the list of programs and resources that may help students.



## Bag of Rocks



Image by [Freeepik](#)

Life can be stressful. Everyone feels stress sometimes. Some stresses are big; some are small.

Many people come to the United States with hope for the future AND difficult memories from the past. Difficult memories from the past can be like heavy rocks that we carry with us. Stress in America can cause us to carry more heavy rocks in our bags.

When we have a lot of bad memories and stress, our invisible bag of rocks is *HEAVY*.

Some rocks can be big and heavy and stay in your bag for a long time. Some rocks may feel smaller and lighter. If we have too many small rocks, they can be difficult too.

When our bag is heavy, it is difficult to do what we need to do. We think about the heavy rocks a lot.

Sometimes when people come to a new country, they think they can leave their bag of rocks behind. Stress in the United States can add more rocks.

It can cause people to think a lot about all of the rocks that they carry in their bag.

We can do things to make our bags of rocks lighter. *We don't have to carry our rocks alone.* Today we will talk about things we can do in the United States to make our bags of rocks easier to carry.

## Bag of Rocks Discussion Questions

1. Think about when you first arrived in the United States. How heavy was your bag of rocks then?
2. How heavy is it now?
3. What are some examples of “small rocks” and “big rocks”? They don’t need to be something that happened to you personally.
4. What are some things that have been difficult since you came to the United States? Write them in the chart below under “Stress in the United States.”
5. What are some things that help you feel *hopeful* about your life here? Write them in the chart below under “Hope in the United States.”

Stress in the United States	Hope in the United States

6. What health problems can carrying a heavy bag of rocks for many years cause?
  - a. What are some things we can do to help these health problems?
  - b. What are some things we can do to help remove heavy rocks from our bag little by little?