

3.9 Mental Health: Bag of Rocks Lesson

To the teacher:

The Bag of Rocks lesson is based on the work of Marla Lipscomb, MSW, LCSW, of Saint Alphonsus CARE Maternal Child Health Program Boise, Idaho. She specializes in providing trauma counseling for refugee populations as well as providing mental health orientations for new refugees to the U.S.

This lesson offers a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive way to talk about mental health non-clinically and respectfully, using the “bag of rocks” as a metaphor. The use of narrative is an indirect approach that draws upon cultural strengths of storytelling, as well as helping to decrease stigma associated with mental health and normalizing symptoms that many adult ELL students may be experiencing.

Lesson Preparation

- Before presenting the Bag of Rocks lesson, read Marla Lipscomb’s excellent, brief, and not-too-technical paper, [“Talking About Mental Health: A Narrative Approach”](#) . The paper conveys valuable pointers for trauma-informed and culturally sensitive discussion of stress with adult immigrant audiences. It will help you better understand how to help learners understand what resources and supports are available, while maintaining healthy boundaries in the class.
- See also [1.17, Mental Health and ESOL Learners](#), in this toolkit.
- Come to class with contact information for culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services and/or multicultural social service providers for your area. Ideally, print the contact list to give to each learner to have as a reference if they or someone they know needs it. To find this information, you can contact your county’s department of social services/human services/family services, local hospital social work/case management departments, churches that learners attend in the community, or local directories of nonprofit human service providers. If your program works with refugee services, these services will likely be able to provide you with a list of local providers.



Using the Story

- The lesson is designed to be impersonal and indirect. Learners can offer personal information if they choose to, but they should not feel pressured to in any way.
- Pre-reading: Have learners look at the title and picture first and make guesses as to what they think the story will be about in relation to the health unit or health lesson you are working on.
- Let students read the story silently, circling any words they don't understand.
- Read the story to the class as they listen.
- Discuss any words learners don't understand.
- Elicit learners' comments and questions on story.
- Proceed to **Discussion Questions**. Emphasize that it's the learner's choice whether or not they want to share.
 - For **Questions 1 and 2**, let learners who wish to share with whole group.
 - For **Question 3**, different learners may perceive what is a big or small "rock" (or stressor) differently. That is OK. If a learner offers information on having experienced any traumas personally in discussion of "big rock" examples, offer to speak with them after the class about help that is available. Do not attempt to counsel them yourself. Just offer a referral.
 - For **Question 4**, have learners brainstorm things that are stressful about living in the U.S. They may talk about stresses of acculturation, resettlement, or other stresses they experience in daily life. (Some possible examples learners might provide: *getting used to a new culture/new ways of doing things, learning a new language, finding jobs/place to live, immigration issues, separation from family, busy schedules, different foods, etc.*) Learners can choose examples to write in the left side of the chart.
 - For **Question 5**, have learners brainstorm things that give them hope for their life in the U.S. (Some possible examples learners might provide: *more opportunities in U.S., more work in U.S., together with family in U.S., better education for children in U.S., etc.*) You can explain hope as "the feeling/belief that life can get better/easier" or "the feeling/belief that the future will be better." What shows learners that things will be better? Learners can choose examples to write in the right side of the chart.



- **Question 6** can help learners make the connection between stress and its physical and emotional consequences. Learners can work together in small groups to make a list, and then share it with the whole group. Some possible learner responses: *thinking too much, body pain, headaches, sleep problems, getting angry easily, difficulty with memory, etc.*
- For **Question 6a**, learner responses might include things like: *exercise, take breaks, religious or spiritual practices (e.g., church, mosque, temple, prayer, meditation), better nutrition, do activities you like, talk to a friend or family member, go to counseling, etc.* If counseling is mentioned by learners, go ahead and distribute the community resource list at this point (see presentation tips in next bullet item).
- For **Question 6b**: This is your opportunity to introduce local resources if you have not already done so. If learners don't mention it themselves, state that often, talking with another person about "all of the heavy rocks you are carrying in your bag" can help you to continue to heal (get better) or get support for stress you are experiencing in the United States. Ask learners who some people are in the community who would be good to speak with about these things. They may suggest counseling services or religious figures. You can fill in the gaps in their knowledge:
 - "In the United States, 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 in this new country.
 - "A counselor is also a safe person to talk with about things from your past that you are carrying with you.
 - "A counselor can help you to feel better from things from the past.
 - "A counselor can help you with problems you are experiencing in America.
 - "It is important to choose an interpreter you trust to work with your counselor.
 - "Here is a list of some places in this area where you can talk to people."
- Encourage learners to share the resource list with family or friends.



Bag of Rocks



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?

