

# 6 Ways to Enhance Seniors' Mental Health

The percentage of Americans with mental health diagnoses increased dramatically over the last few years. While all age groups were impacted, the most dramatic rise was seen in seniors, with a recent study revealing a 57.4% spike among those 65 and older. The likely cause, especially for seniors, is the lingering effect of the isolation and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here are a few ways your community can help residents feel connected and engaged to improve their mental health.

## Music

Whether playing or listening, music is an easy way to enhance mood, decrease anxiety, and reduce stress. Research has shown that music has a powerful effect on the brain, activating areas associated with emotion and memory. It can also have a positive effect on brain chemistry, increasing levels of dopamine and decreasing levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Music is especially effective when someone is feeling sad, anxious, or stressed.



## Exercise

In addition to improving physical health, exercise has been shown to have a positive effect on people who are experiencing depression or anxiety. Exercise can be simple, like a walk outside, or done in a structured setting. Exercise classes have the added benefit of social interaction and can be an effective motivator to those who might be resistant. Residents who can find a type of exercise they enjoy are more likely to make it an ongoing part of their lives.

## Clubs

Bringing residents who share a common interest together is an excellent way to foster connection and combat loneliness. Clubs can be centered around almost any interest; book clubs, knitting groups, and game nights are all examples that can bring residents together. Also, consider establishing groups for those who have common backgrounds. For example, a group of veterans may benefit from getting together and sharing their experiences.

## Classes

Learning something new is a great way to keep residents engaged and their minds active. Classes also offer an opportunity for social interaction and can foster relationships between residents who have similar interests. Examples of classes that work well in communities include art and craft lessons, instruction on using technology, and cooking classes.

## Entertainment

Bringing entertainment into the community is a fun way to bring residents together and improve emotional well-being. This could include student performers from local dance, music, or theater programs, who are always looking for an audience to perform in front of, to volunteer story readers or lecturers.

## 6 Ways to Enhance Seniors' Mental Health, Cont.

### Pet Therapy

There are numerous benefits to bringing pet therapy into your community, both physical and mental. Contact with animals has been shown to decrease anxiety, improve memory, lower blood pressure, improve motor skills, and even reduce pain. Keep reading to meet Ruby, a certified therapy dog who has a special knack for bringing happiness to everyone she meets. Learn more about her intensive training and certification, and the positive effect she has on the residents she visits.

### Unleashing Happiness: Meet Ruby

Not every dog has what it takes to become a therapy dog. While they have to be smart, they also need to have the right personality. Rachel Bailey, a senior marketing manager with PharMerica, knew her chocolate lab, Ruby, had the right stuff when she first started training as a puppy. "Ruby's trainer hinted that she had the perfect personality for the job," says Bailey. "Once I thought about it, I knew she would be a great addition to the communities we serve."

Ruby's training journey took about four months. Her training began with basic obedience, then progressed to an advanced level and a therapy dog training course. Therapy training included desensitization to things like wheelchairs, ramps, and alarms she might encounter while working.



To become certified, Ruby had to earn a Canine Good Citizen (CGC) certification before testing for her Therapy Dog certificate. And it's not just the dogs who are tested. Bailey says she had to pass a written exam before she could work with Ruby in public places.

Bailey brings Ruby for visits with residents regularly. "The residents always look forward to their visits with Ruby," she says. "They love watching her perform tricks, especially when she comes up with a new one!" And by "everyone," Bailey means staff, too. Nurses and other staff members, she says, look forward to seeing Ruby as much as the residents do.

She's also a fixture at industry trade shows and other events when Bailey is working. "Ruby's bright smile and happy dance always lightens the mood." Bailey says. "She makes everyone in the room happy."



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– Rachel Bailey, senior marketing manager with PharMerica