

Wise & Healthy Aging's WISE Minds Early-Stage Memory Loss Program

WISE Minds, an evidence-informed early-stage memory loss group established in 2016 in beautiful downtown Santa Monica, is comprised of two cohorts of up to 12 participants meeting three times a week for mutual support, cognitive and physical stimulation, and recreational activities to help members maintain their independence. The program is led by Educational Gerontologist Miriam Caiden, MSG, PhD, who has worked to support, train and educate older adults for over 25 years. Dr. Caiden created a program manual that is designed so that the program can be implemented in a variety of settings. The program is competitively priced, and attendance has remained steady, allowing for program expansion.

The five-hour curriculum emphasizes cognitive skills, physical activity, and social interaction. Each session starts with coffee and socializing, followed by an “ice breaker” activity and a group short-term memory exercise, emphasizing practical applications (e.g. shopping lists). Physical activity using the Arthritis Foundation Exercise Program includes line dancing, taught for the purposes of performance. The afternoon consists of a rotation of table games, creative projects (Chinese calligraphy), visual-spatial challenges (Tangrams, origami), problem-solving activities, guided autobiography, pen-pal projects, food activities (baking for Family & Friends Tea, and bake sale), and intellectual stimulation via live on-line and in-person lectures and concerts. Independent living skills, self-efficacy, and cognitive challenges are incorporated into the schedule and environment as members make their own coffee, move furniture for activities, set the table for lunch, navigate independently to and from the restroom located in another part of the building, and learn to use public transportation via monthly outings.

Our community partnerships include adopting a local third grade class for exchange visits and a pen pal project, serving as a pen pal site for Quills to Connect (a student-run UCLA organization), collaboration with Music Mends Minds (an organization providing music therapy and performance opportunities for people with dementia), student concerts with the UCLA School of Music Gluck Fellows, and presentations by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. In early 2024, WISE Minds Director, Rachel Sangestanian, established the “Brookdale BNGRP Roundtable” – a monthly discussion group comprised of BNGRP grantees which further enriches the quality of programming through sharing ideas and resources.

Carepartners benefit from four volunteer-led, bi-monthly support groups, two of which are virtual and two in-person. WISE Minds members and their carepartners are further supported through case management services so they can continue living in the community, and carepartners are also encouraged to participate in our active senior center, called “The Club”.

WISE Minds couldn't function without our dedicated and robust group of volunteers and interns! WISE Minds had over 20 volunteers and interns serve in the last year, including Occupational Therapy interns from USC, and a social work intern from California State University, Dominguez Hills. Our volunteers come from all walks of life, including a retired LAFD firefighter who serves in our kitchen, and a retired UCLA Nurse Administrator who also runs two caregiver support groups and serves on our Board of Directors. Our volunteers lend not only their time, but their talent, greatly enriching our programs and services.