

Get smart about brain health

<http://www.mcknights.com/get-smart-about-brain-health/article/401144/>

Improving brain health has become a hot topic among older adults — and consequently among those who work with this population. Activity directors and lifestyle coordinators across the country are trying to find the best solutions for residents who request “brain games” out of a desire to improve their memory and sharpen their cognitive skills.

The fact is — and this is borne out by recent research — not all brain health programs are effective.

Online brain games – “small, narrow, and fleeting advances”

The Stanford Center on Longevity and Berlin's Max Planck Institute for

Human Development commissioned a consensus report from nearly 70 scientists on the current state of research on brain training. The group evaluated the claims and promises being made for brain games that have participants practicing specific cognitive skills, and their consensus was that, in spite of some evidence for cognitive improvement, “these small, narrow, and fleeting advances are often billed as general and lasting improvements of mind and brain.” Their ultimate conclusion: “claims promoting brain games are frequently exaggerated and at times misleading,” and “exaggerated and misleading claims exploit the anxiety of adults facing old age for commercial purposes.”

In the absence of additional research, the group recommends that, rather than devote time to practicing brain games, “individuals lead physically active, intellectually challenging, and socially engaged lives, in ways that work for them.”

A holistic approach

Compare this view with one of the key recommendations from the 2012 Alzheimer's Disease Summit, which called for an approach to improving brain health that combines behavioral, lifestyle, and environmental interventions with pharmacological treatments (for those with Alzheimer's) to maximize the potential for benefit. Although the evidence supporting behavioral interventions is preliminary, the behaviors promoted, such as increasing physical activity, eating healthy foods, maintaining a high level of social and cognitive engagement, and stress reduction for emotional/spiritual health, are recommended behaviors with benefits far exceeding the risk of participation.



Catherine O'Brien

Boost Your Brain & Memory

As research continued to build on the benefits of a holistic approach to brain health, Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging was already in the midst of developing a program that would incorporate this approach. Ultimately called Boost Your Brain & Memory, the program is based on two years of research and was developed by Institute researchers along with external experts in the fields of clinical neuropsychology, epidemiology, public health, and mindfulness-based practices.

Boost Your Brain & Memory consists of eight one-hour educational video sessions, including an introductory session, six sessions focused on lifestyle factors (physical activity, social engagement, intellectual engagement, nutrition, emotional well-being, and spiritual life), and one concluding session. The introductory session introduces foundational concepts such as dementia, brain plasticity, cognitive reserve, as well as provides an overview of the specific topics covered. With the exception of the introductory session, the instructor begins each session by asking participants to report progress and engages in a brief discussion about overcoming any barriers or obstacles the participants may have encountered in trying to increase their participation in a given area.

Next, the instructor plays a series of two or three short videos that describe the benefits of a specific area related to brain health. These videos not only present recommendations for lifestyle change based on current research, but also specific research studies and their findings, demonstrating the reasons behind why these recommendations are being made. Following the presentation, the instructor leads participants in discussion and a brief activity related to the topic area, such as an in-class set of exercises in the physical activity session. Participants are also asked to set short-term goals relating to increasing their activity in the area addressed.

Although the main focus of Boost Your Brain & Memory is on the promotion of long-term cognitive health through lifestyle, the program also provides a set of memory techniques that participants can use to improve everyday memory tasks such as remembering where they parked their car or what they need from the store. In this way, the program addresses both long-term interest in reducing dementia risk, as well as immediate needs for better everyday functioning.

After releasing [Boost Your Brain & Memory](#) last fall, we have received feedback from a number of senior living communities that have implemented it with residents. According to staff, residents appreciate the research-based video explanations, and are immediately implementing at least some lifestyle behaviors outlined in the program, such as starting a regular exercise routine or beginning to be more social within their community. In addition, our pre-release research shows that participants reported significantly greater behavior changes than those who did not take the program. In other words, older adults who learn what lifestyle factors or good habits can improve their brain health—from changes to diet and exercise to meditation and spirituality — are more likely to adopt those good habits.

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