

Dementia and Brain Health – Exercising Your Brain **By: Shelby Downer, Client Support Coordinator**

The brain influences everything we do - how we think, feel, remember, communicate, read, write, work, sleep, play, move etc. Similar to our body, our brain should be regularly exercised for optimal functioning. Healthy brain activities promote brain health by stimulating the brain's networks and connections, which work together to help us understand the world around us. Brain health can be supported through a number of strategies including memory games, physical activity, socialization, healthy eating choices, and reducing stress (Alzheimer Society of Canada).

The link below connects you with a short video on the Alzheimer Society of Canada's website which provides additional information on how healthy brain strategies stimulate the brain. Suggestions for maintaining brain health are also addressed such as (1) challenging yourself to move slightly outside your comfort zone, (2) novelty, and (3) learning something new.

<http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/About-dementia/About-the-brain/Brain-health>

Exercising your brain does not have to be exhaustive. In fact, let's try an "exercise" right now:

With a pen complete the following instructions:

1. Write your name on a piece of paper
2. Write your name *backwards* on a piece of paper
3. Write your name on a piece of paper with your non-dominant hand

Were tasks 2 and 3 a little more difficult? Congratulations, you just exercised your brain by *challenging yourself* to do a familiar task a little differently.

Group Programming to Support Brain Health

Alzheimer Society group programs for those with dementia incorporate healthy brain activities into each session. Support groups promote brain health in two ways: (1) through the challenge and stimulation of participating in the activities themselves, and, (2) through the *socialization* that is enhanced in a support group environment. The types of activities that are offered in each group are outlined below.

CHANGES/Early Stages Groups

Our CHANGES Support Group and other Early Stage Support Groups provide various healthy brain activities for those with early stage dementia through word games, craft activities, active games, trivia games, and group brainstorming activities.

Milestones - Middle Stages Groups

Our Milestones Support Group is provided to those individuals with middle stage dementia. Activities that are provided in this group may be similar to those provided in the Early Stage Groups; however, instructions may be simplified or modified to meet the needs of the participants. It is important to note that a progression in Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia does not mean that the ability to complete a particular activity is lost. Sometimes *the approach* to the implementation of the activity may need some attention. For example, a modification of the activity, a simplification of the instructions, a demonstration, or additional cuing may further support the individual's ability to engage in the same activity. Examples of additional activities that are offered include sensory activities, reminiscing activities, puzzles, music activities, sorting and matching games, relaxation activities, and familiar phrase games.

Activity Club

The purpose of the Activity Club is to provide an environment that promotes socialization and brain health through healthy brain activities such as those presented above. This club focuses solely on healthy brain activities for the duration of the group session.

Step Out Walking Club

One of the key messages from the most recent World Alzheimer's Report (2014) suggests that "what is good for your heart is good for your brain" (pg. 2). As many of us know, physical activity helps to maintain both physical and mental health by reducing stress, enhancing sleep quality, improving mood, and maintaining muscle and bone health (Alzheimer Society of Canada). The Step Out Walking Club is a volunteer-supported program that meets every Thursday morning to walk at the Peterborough Zoo.

Brain Health at Home – A Joint Effort!

As a caregiver, it is important to support your own brain health as well. Whether your loved one is in the early or middle stages of their dementia, remember that engaging in healthy brain activities is benefiting both of you. Join in!

Suggested activities that can be completed together at home include:

- Taking a walk outside
- Chores....with a twist! Find new ways to do daily/weekly chores (i.e. wash the windows with the opposite hand)
- Make a scrapbook or memory box of your shared memories
- Cook together
- Play "name that tune" with familiar music
- Start an ongoing game of Scrabble where each person takes their turn throughout the day
- Discuss what you read or watch (i.e. current events in the newspaper, a book, a movie or TV show)

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- Talk about your favourite and most *meaningful* activities and discuss ways to modify or simplify them so you can continue to enjoy them together
- Try some of the strategies suggested in the Alzheimer Society's "Heads up for Healthier Brains" brochure:
http://www.alzheimer.ca/~media/Files/national/Heads-up/heads_up_healthier_brains_e.pdf

For further information and support regarding dementia and brain health, please contact the Alzheimer Society and our Client Support Staff will be happy to assist you.

Sources

Alzheimer Society of Canada. (n.d.). *Brain health*. Retrieved 09 18, 2014, from <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/About-dementia/About-the-brain/Brain-health>.

Alzheimer Society of Canada. (n.d.). Early stage: Staying active in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Retrieved 09 18, 2014 from <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Staying-active/Early-stage>.

Alzheimer's Disease International (2014). World Alzheimer's Report 2014 Key Messages. Retrieved 09 18 2014 from <http://www.alz.co.uk/sites/default/files/pdfs/World-Alzheimer-Report-2014-key-messages.pdf?1>.