

BRAIN GAMES

Mentally stimulating activities help seniors keep their minds sharp.

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Getting cut and fit, with six-pack abs and rock-hard glutes is all well and good.

But some people feel that it is just as important to give the old gray matter a regular and vigorous workout.

The activities calendar at Royal Senior Care, a medical adult day care center in Atlantic Highlands, is full of things designed to engage the minds of those in attendance: from trivia sessions to arts and crafts, from coming up with answers to the people who write to Dear Abby, to bingo.

Especially bingo. At least that's the consensus of Gladys Ramos, 70, of Asbury Park and Rosa Diaz, 73, of Long Branch who rarely miss a session on the days they attend.

Ramos has six bingo cards spread out in front of her and, at the calling of each number, rather quickly looks over each of the cards and covers the appropriate squares.

"You have to concentrate," she says.

She believes that it's important to keep both physically and mentally fit. "At home, I like to do word-search puzzles," Ramos says. "But with things like this, if they are too easy, you get bored. If they're too hard, you just won't do it."

Finding that middle ground is part of the job of Royal Senior Care's activities director Karen Fischer, particularly when one considers the range of people attending, from low-functioning to high-functioning people.

"Our goal is to keep our clients functioning at the highest possible level for as long as possible," Fischer says. "We believe that these activities, even things like reminiscing times, when they talk about their past, about what they remember from growing up, help our clients hang on to the skills they have."

It also helps with self-esteem, she says, because the mastery of certain tasks gives the clients a sense of accomplishment."

The evidence at one adult senior day care is limited and anecdotal, but for Rita Torres, a social worker at the facility, it cannot be denied.

"We know that our clients' families tell us that our program seems to help those who come here," she says. "They talk about an increase in lucidity."

Dr. Jorge F. Corzo is the medical director for Riverview Rehabilitation Center at Riverview Medical Center in Red Bank.

To hear Corzo talk about it, cognitive function can be seen as a filled bucket. And then come age, disease or trauma and the bucket develops a slow leak.

"If you have more to start with, it will take longer to empty out," he says.

Working the brain has definite advantages in the short term; Corzo says the research is clear on that.

"What we do know, from our rehabilitation population, is that different parts of the brain can take over from damaged parts. We know, too, that children can learn a second language more easily than an adult. There is what we call a plasticity to the brain that lessens over age."

What science doesn't know is whether the exercising of the brain has long-term effects in forestalling the onset of Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.

"We just don't have those kinds of longitudinal studies," he says.

Dr. Jesse Israel, division Chief of Geriatric Medicine at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch, isn't so sure that mental exercise can turn away the ravages of dementia.

"There are no magic bullets when it comes to Alzheimer's," Israel says. "We have medicines that can slow the progression, but the two biggest factors in predicting Alzheimer's are age — 50 percent of those over 85 develop the disease — and family history. And the average time from initial diagnosis to death is 10 years."

But that is not to say that brain workouts have no value, she says.

"It's a quality-of-life issue," Israel says. "Of course, I tell my patients to continue to do the New York Times crossword puzzles, if that's what they enjoy."

For those who are healthy, though, Corzo is an advocate of these kind of mental calisthenics. It's a way of getting a bigger cranial bucket.

"We have medicines that help those who have, say, a cognitive loss due to trauma, medicines that help with wakefulness, attention span and processing information," he says. "But unless you have some cognitive functional element to go with it, it is not much use."

In other words, you have to do something with the ability, and that applies to healthy people as well.

"Science is showing that the adage 'use it or lose it' has some validity as it applies to the brain," Corzo says.

There are companies around that have developed software programs to give people a mental workout.

Alvaro Fernandez is the CEO and co-founder of one such California-based company, SharpBrains.

"We've developed software designed to give people brain exercise over 14 different areas of cognitive function, including memory, time estimation and divided attention tasks, in our MindFit program." Alvarez says. "We believe that the keys to success are providing novelty, variety and constant challenge. It's a fitness center for the brain. You can do Sudoku and crossword puzzles, of course. That's helpful. It's like taking a walk around the block. But a challenging set of 'brain exercises' is like a workout at a gym with a personal trainer."

Dr. Elkhonon Goldberg is the other co-founder of SharpBrains. According to his Web site, his clinical practice "includes neuropsychological diagnosis, neurocognitive rehabilitation, and forensic neuropsychology. His more than 30 years of clinical experience includes traumatic brain injury, memory impairment, executive deficit, dementia, stroke, dyslexias, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder and other conditions. He occasionally provides supervision to other neuropsychologists."

He says that research shows that working the brain can actually increase the connectivity of brain cells. If people do it.

Elkhonon knows that Thomas Edison was fond of saying that most people will do anything to avoid

the hard work of thinking.

He hopes to change that, he says.



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