



http://www.fredericksburg.com/features/health_living/keeping-the-mind-sharp-along-with-the-body/article_accf1b14-46de-5dcb-a58c-d26ce858045d.html



May 12, 2018

WORKOUTS, LESSONS STRENGTHENING BODIES, MINDS

Keeping the mind sharp along with the body



(Left) Sharon Hurley takes a therapeutic movement class at the King George YMCA and she studies Spanish daily to keep her mind sharp. (Right) Paula Van Alstine (right) leads the therapeutic movement class at the King George YMCA. She credits exercise and the circulation it promotes with keeping mind and body strong.

Sharon Hurley doesn't want to say "adios" to her mental or physical abilities, so she exercises both to keep them in shape.

The 77-year-old takes several classes at the King George YMCA, including one on therapeutic movement. She has arthritis, and the class helps those with similar debilitating issues build core muscles and increase balance, said teacher Paula Van Alstine.

The activity improves mind and body, said fellow student Ira West, an 87-year-old who's been an athlete all his life.

www.PoetsWalk-SpringHills.com



(Left) Ira West, 87, has been an athlete all his life and particularly enjoys exercise these days because he says it helps him focus. (Right) At Poet's Walk Fredericksburg, Anna Gatewood (left) encourages Esther Seay to sing along. Seay suffers with dementia and can't carry on a conversation, but she can remember song lyrics.

"Sometimes, your mind sort of goes off in a tangent," West said. "This helps you focus on the moment."

Hurley uses other methods to give her brain a workout.

She does mental exercises to remember the names of fellow class members so she can greet each personally. She associates their names with those of someone else she knows, like Carol, after her mother, or Kathy, after her cousin. She also calls to mind certain movie stars, such as when she sees the YMCA director, Elizabeth Taylor.

And, Hurley studies Spanish for 20 or 30 minutes daily. She learned some vocabulary in high school, then forgot most of it when she and her husband moved to Germany.

While in Europe, the retired budget analyst learned German, along with some French and Italian, and recently decided to get back in touch with her inner "señora." Each morning, she fires up a free program on the computer and recites conversational Spanish.

"I just try to keep my mind sharp because I don't want to get senile," said Hurley, who lives in King George. "My grandmother started going really senile when she was my age or a little younger, and I just don't want that to happen to me."



BRAIN HEALTH

Everyone's brain slows down as they age, just as other parts of their bodies. But the natural aging process doesn't automatically lead to dementia, a chronic disorder caused by brain disease or injury and marked by memory problems, personality changes and impaired reasoning that interfere with daily life.

There are more than 100 types of dementia, and Alzheimer's disease is the most common. It accounts for 60 to 80 percent of dementia cases, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

There's no miracle cure to guarantee a sound mind, according to a July 2017 study by the Global Council on Brain Health. The scientists were sponsored by the AARP, and the study suggested people can help maintain their memory, reasoning skills and ability to focus by taking a cue from Hurley.

Activities such as learning a new language, building new personal relationships, volunteering in the community, taking a class or choosing a new hobby can improve brain health, the scientists said.

At the therapeutic movement class, several members arrive early so they can talk before Van Alstine gets them moving. They have myriad health ailments, such as Parkinson's disease or depression, torn rotator cuffs or replaced hips and knees, poor posture and scoliosis.

Despite their different issues, they find a commonality with each other, the teacher said.

"Fellowship is a great tool in facing the challenge of pain due to injury, disease and the aging process," said Van Alstine, who's 63 and has been teaching fitness for three decades.

There's a lot of sharing of personal stories in the class, as well as giggling. West said being around other people is an important component of mind-and-body wellness.

"If you don't put forth the special effort," he said, "you lose a lot of socialization."

'LESS TRAPPED'

Even for those whose functions have been damaged by dementia, mental exercises can help the brain focus. That includes crossword and number puzzles, reading and writing, painting and coloring and especially music.



Diana Bright sees that at Poet's Walk Fredericksburg, a facility for those whose memories have left them. She's the executive director, and she calls Esther Seay, 83, a prime example of the way music helps a person connect.

Seay has suffered from the progressive loss of language. She has aphasia, or "word salad;" she mumbles, but can't quite express herself.

But when the music starts, the song lyrics come tumbling out. Her body starts to sway, and her mouth starts to move.

Anna Gatewood, activities director at Poet's Walk, led a recent sing-a-long, and Seay pushed her walker to the middle of the floor where Gatewood stood. Keep in mind that Seay couldn't answer what she had for lunch or the color of her blouse, but she could sing and dance to "Shine On, Harvest Moon" as if she were in the Ziegfeld Follies.

When Gatewood trilled that she "ain't had no lovin' since January, February, June or July," Seay wiggled with emphasis at the mention of each month. She did the same singing and dancing with old favorites such as "America" and "Yankee Doodle Boy," "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "Give My Regards to Broadway."

Seay has broken her hip three times while dancing, Bright said, but she's living proof that the brain can retain its connection with creativity long after its link to communication has been severed.

Seeing that connection revived again is wonderful, Bright said.

"They're able to regain a little more of who they were when they were young," she added. "It makes them feel less trapped."