



Brain Calisthenics



Have you ever walked into a room and then forgot what you went in there for? As we grow older, we notice that our brains don't seem to work as well as they once did. We forget where we put our keys; we forget someone's

name even though it's right on the tip of our tongue. The aging population has become a prime target for mental workout programs including "brain calisthenics," hormones, vitamins, and special diets to stimulate memory.

Dr. Timothy Salthouse at the University of Virginia cautions people about claims from commercial programs because there is still very little scientific evidence on their effectiveness. Typically, research has focused on short-term effects. Still, that doesn't mean that mental exercise isn't useful. Research has yielded some hopeful results of mental activity and brain training. Doing puzzles and solving brain teasers lead to measurable improvements if the subjects also followed a healthy diet and got some exercise. Other studies found that memory training might slow down mental decline in older people. One problem with mental exercise though, is even when you benefit from one kind of training, there may be no carry-over to different kinds of mental activities. For example, if you learn to remember number sequences, they may not help you remember names in a big group. Also, those who may already have cognitive problems may not benefit from training and may become

discouraged. However, there are still plenty of good reasons to stay mentally active. Make your own plan for staying sharp and alert.

- Continue to learn something new every day. Read, take a class, do crossword puzzles, or pursue a stimulating hobby. Do something that challenges you and makes you think. Try not to tackle things that make you too frustrated.
- Exercise daily. Exercise has been shown to benefit both the brain and one's mood. Exercise supplies a better blood supply to the brain and adults who exercise tend to do better on mental tests.
- Get enough sleep. Insomnia can affect your ability to function.
- Volunteer. Help others. Join a group or club. Interacting with others will benefit the brain much more than watching TV or sitting still.
- Eat a healthy diet. Research says the brain benefits from the same diet that helps the cardiovascular system.
- Treat depression and get regular checkups. Chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure can impact mental acuity. Do all you can to stay in good health.
- Don't waste your money on supplements or programs that claim to promote memory improvement. Products that are labeled "anti-aging" don't work!

*Adapted from UC Berkeley Wellness Letter, September 2007.
Contributed by Nancy Recker.*

How to Give Your Immune System a Boost

food for thought



The bad news is that this is the middle of cold and flu season and the flu can be deadly for older adults. The good news is that there are several easy things you can do to give your immune system a boost and reduce your chances of catching either of these "bugs"!

The first thing you can do is to wash your hands often with soap and warm water. Medical professionals say that this is your very best defense against contagious illness.

Second, get a flu shot. Don't believe the rumor that you catch the flu by getting a shot. That's not possible because the organisms in the vaccine are dead! Keep in mind, however, that you are not fully immunized until two weeks after your shot. So, it is possible to get the flu because of exposure to the flu just before or after a shot!

Researchers at Tufts University found evidence that eating a diet rich in vitamins B6, B12, and vitamin E in particular can help older adults fight off colds and flu.

B vitamins can be found in many foods including starchy vegetables such as peas, dry beans and corn, non-citrus fruits, fortified cereals, fish, and low-fat meats and dairy products. Vitamin E is found in nuts, vegetable oils, tomato sauces, red peppers, and leafy green vegetables.

Another immune-boosting nutrient is the mineral selenium. University of North Carolina research found the influenza virus mutated into a more dangerous strain of the disease in mice with low amounts of selenium in their systems. Selenium works by helping the body's enzymes protect cells from free radicals produced when we have an infection.

The amount of selenium in foods appears to vary depending on the amount in the soil in which a food is grown or where an animal eats, but it can usually be found in nuts (especially Brazil nuts), several kinds of fish and seafood, whole grains (especially whole wheat and barley), pork, and poultry. Be cautious with selenium in supplements. It can be toxic if you get too much. The Institute of Medicine says that the safe upper intake of selenium is 400 micrograms per day.

Finally, exercise has been shown to increase our immune systems.

Contributed by Joyce J. Brown, Extension Educator, Family and Consumer Sciences, Ohio State University Extension, Athens and Meigs Counties.

Adapted from "Chow Line: Fight Cold, Flu with Balanced Diet" by Martha Filipic, a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center.



Gray Heroes: Elder Tales from Around the World

Edited by Jane Yolen

216 pages and a bibliography

What makes this collection of folk tales unique is that the "heroes" are all elders. Yolen divides the 75 tales into four categories: wisdom, trickery, adventure, and a little bit of love, which deals with the love life of older people.

The following are some examples of the tales in each category:

- Wisdom: "Empty-Cup Mind" (Japan) and "The Brownie of Blednock" (Scotland)
- Trickery: "The Old Woman and the Giant" (Philippines) and "The Talking Turkeys" (Syria)
- Adventure: "The Man Who Lodged with Serpents" (Hungary) and "The Hunted Hare" (England)
- And a Little Bit of Love: "How Much You Remind Me of My Husband!" (El Salvador) and "A Clever Old Bride" (Korea)

This book is a great read featuring folk tales from four of the five continents. It's especially nice to read tales from so many different cultures that, in their varied traditions, view elders as heroes.

Contributed by Judy Hardy, Ohio Department of Aging.

Emery and Emogene Coen



Living life to the fullest—that would be Emery and Emogene Coen. We

attend the same church, and over the years I have come to admire their love of life, sense of humor, and active aging!

Emery and Emogene each had a life prior to meeting one another. Emery retired after 30 years with the postal service and building homes. Emogene was an LPN and then X-ray technician. She retired after 36 years and

helped care for three aunts (92, 95, and 99)!

On September 6, 1997, Emery and Emogene wed and they have been happily married ever since.

This past year, Emery turned 90 and Emogene celebrated her 86th year. Age has not slowed them down. They enjoy traveling to watch the Alexander High School girls sports' teams, and their interest has taken them from local contests in Southern Ohio, all the way to state competitions.

They also enjoy spending summers at their Canadian lake-front cottage. Whether sitting on

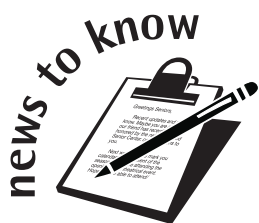
their deck, visiting with friends, or fishing, there's never a dull moment at the lake. Health issues kept them from going last summer, but plans are underway for this year.

Emogene enjoys hosting the Thursday evening meals at church by planning the menu, doing the cooking, and organizing the cleanup. I hope to have her boundless energy when I am 86!

The twinkle in Emery's eye and Emogene's infectious laugh bring life and joy to any room they are in. I consider myself fortunate to count them as friends.

Contributed by Cindy Oliveri.

The Benefits of Volunteering



Older adults have a lot to give back to the community through volunteer work. Whether they are delivering hot meals to a homebound individual or helping a schoolchild with reading, older

volunteers can make a difference. According to the Volunteering in the United States 2006 national survey, 28% of people aged 55–64 volunteer and 24% of those 65 and older do so.

There are many reasons for volunteering, but some of the research indicates that volunteering can improve the quality of life for older adults and offer some specific benefits.

- Volunteers are healthier.
- Volunteering helps an older adult stay physically active, which leads to a lower incidence of heart disease and diabetes.

- Volunteering helps to keep the brain engaged, and therefore increases both cognitive and mental well-being.

There are volunteer opportunities all around us. It is as simple as looking around your neighborhood in schools, social service agencies, youth organizations, the arts, and local parks to name a few. You can contact your local council on aging or call 1-800-VOLUNTEER, a web site and call center that provides volunteers with a direct connection to local volunteer opportunities that match interests, skills, and the common desire to make a difference. More volunteer opportunities are also available by visiting the U.S. Administration on Aging web site (www.aoa.gov).

Contributed by Linnette Mizer Goard, Extension Educator, Family and Consumer Sciences, Ohio State University Extension, Lorain County.

*Sources: http://www.aoa.gov/press/fact/oam_Volunteer.pdf
<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>*

Sending and Receiving Messages



The next time you meet someone and make a snap judgment, trust your feelings. The latest findings in biology and brain science reveal that we are "wired to connect" with others. This phenomenon, called "social intelligence," was identified by Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., of Harvard. Dr.

Goleman, a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, has studied brain and behavior science for 12 years.

Any reaction to another person or his reaction to you causes the brain to release hormones. These affect everything from your heart, to your immune system and consequently the rest of your day. A good exchange is like sunshine and a bad exchange is like rain. When you have that exchange, you catch strong emotions as you would catch a cold.

All of these emotions are controlled by the amygdala, an almond shaped area in the midbrain. When someone smiles at you, your brain is given a cue and you smile back. If people approach with anger, the body prepares for fight or flight. The fact that our body alerts us to distress is old news. The knowledge that there is an emotional "contagion" is new.

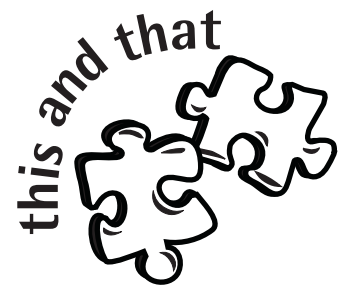
Emotional contagion means that our moods come from our interactions. When someone blows his horn at you in the morning, the mood is set for the day. On the other hand, if you let someone in a lane of traffic, you get a release of the neurotransmitter dopamine or serotonin in the brain that makes you feel better.

A universally agreed upon fact is that one key to a good life is having enriching relationships. Think about the people around you whose lives you touch every day. Think about toxic relationships that touch your life. The way you act and react defines your responsibility to your family, friends, and community. Equally important is decreasing the number of emotionally toxic interactions.

People recover from disease and live longer surrounded by close family and friends. Your presence in the room or a touch to a hand activates brain chemistry. These contacts make a meaningful difference. A tear, laughter, a heartfelt look, or silence are equally important. *Both* brains are at work!

Sources: Goleman, Daniel, Ph.D. (2006). *Social Intelligence*.
Forsyth, John. (2007). *University of Albany: timesunion.com*

Contributed by Linda Vogel, Planning Associate/Training and Advocacy
Area Agency on Agency, 10B.



"Just Being"

Have you seen or heard the quote, "We don't remember days; we remember moments"? Sometimes our hectic pace of life can distract us from taking the time to savor the small pleasures and moments along the way.

In the race of life we sometimes lose sight of "just being." So during this short month of February take some time for "just being." Soaking in a special moment can provide some of life's greatest pleasures. A crackling fire on a cold winter night; a good book; a warm cup of hot cocoa; or time with a child, friend, or partner ... these moments, if we stop long enough to enjoy, are the essence of life.

Contributed by Lynn Dobb, Central Ohio
Area Agency on Aging.

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Address editorial comments to:
Kirk Blair
Ohio State University Extension
Family and Consumer Sciences
185 Arps Hall, 1945 North High Street
Columbus, OH 43210

Issue Editors:

Kirk Blair, Ohio State University Extension
Deanna Clifford, District XI Area Agency on Aging, Inc.
Karen Puterbaugh, Greene County Council on Aging

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Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868

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