

JF&CS pilot program offers seniors a way to maintain healthy brains

by Eric Lidji

Associate Editor

09.14.09 - 09:35 am



Studies show that if senior citizens work their brains, their brains work better and longer.

So for six weeks this summer, a small group of seniors between the ages of 65 and 85 met twice a week to study creative writing, practice tai chi and master computer skills.

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The classes were a part of Brain Builders, a pilot program offered this

summer by Jewish Family & Children's Service. The program was a way for JF&CS to test new ideas about how brain cells regenerate when challenged, even in old age. It gave a group of seniors the chance to take classes for free that will most likely be offered again in the future, possibly for a fee.

Brain Builders is based on a simple idea: the decline of cognitive ability so often associated with old age is often the result of mental atrophy; keep the brain working and it stays sharp. The program is designed for seniors with little to no decline in mental functions. It's not about repairing the brain; it's about preventing it from declining.

"People who are already showing signs of more moderate dementia won't improve," said Stefanie Small, a JF&CS psychotherapist helping to craft the Brain Builders program.

The power of activity, though, is great enough that even a "booster" class once or twice a year has been shown to limit declines in mental ability, Small said.

The pilot program gave JF&CS a chance to test these new ideas about brain function, and tweak the various classes to create a program that works well for seniors in the area. The idea is to create a curriculum that is challenging, but not overwhelming. Small said activities should have several steps that must be remembered and then repeated.

"As dementia progresses, the ability to follow 1-2-3-4 step processes declines," Small said.

It also gave JF&CS a chance to monitor small groups, which promotes social interaction, another activity believed to stave off the decline of cognitive ability in old age, according to JF&CS Clinical Administrator Lisa Spahr, who put the program together with Small.

“One of the ways you can improve your cognitive ability is to be more social,” she said.

This social element is most visible in the creative writing course, taught by Jay Speyerer, where the class shared and discussed original works of short fiction and nonfiction.

During a recent class, one student — who asked, with a smile, to remain nameless to prevent a family emergency — read a story about a woman who is stunned by the dating choices of her granddaughter, a topic that generated a collective sigh of recognition from the room, following by an extensive conversation about changing cultural mores.

“Everyone has their own individual voice, and I think you’re finding a voice in this,” Speyerer told the class afterward. “You’re getting confident in your writing skin.”

After getting confident in their writing skin, the class got confident in their actual skin with a tai chi class taught by Stan Swartz, a local instructor of the ancient Chinese art.

Tai chi is well suited for older people, Swartz said, because mastering its techniques requires patience and concentration, rather than traditional strength and speed.

“We have these very complicated movements to teach the mind to focus on the present moment,” he said as he led the class in a series of simultaneous movements: aligning the head and spine, distributing weight unevenly on the legs, holding the hands straight out from the arms by keeping the wrists unbent, and gently moving all the while.

“One of the goals of tai chi is to stop your mind from thinking, but keeping awareness,” he said.

Performing these various tasks simultaneously requires not only tremendous mental concentration and physical control, it also promotes balance — helping seniors to avoid falls that can be so debilitating — and improves circulation and bone strength.

Spahr said participants ranked tai chi highest of all the Brain Building activities.

For the final class of the day, Joanne Quinn Smith, the self-proclaimed Techno Granny, offered a tutorial in creating and updating blogs. The students, each sitting behind a laptop, followed step-by-step as Smith explained the basics of blogging.

After a full morning, the technical details and occasional unexplainable glitches of computer life seemed to inspire some frustration, but by the end, the group got their blogs online and had instructions for how to maintain them.

Quinn, 58, taught herself within the past few years, and now runs a marketing company, as well as an Internet show “designed to bring baby boomers and others up to snuff with 21st Century technology.”

She described her philosophy for learning how to use the computer and various social media tools, a philosophy that seemed to resonate with the participants: “What I did is: I got in there, I made a mess and then I straightened it out.”

To measure the success of the program, Small and Spahr performed clinical tests on each participant before and after the course. Those results aren’t back yet, but Small and Spahr point to another data set. In recent questionnaires, six of the eight participants surveyed noticed significant improvements in their mood and behaviors since starting the program.

Even more encouraging, six of the participants said the class inspired them to seek out other brain building opportunities in classes offered by other institutions around town.

“I was optimistic about the feedback we were going to get, but it even surpassed what I was expecting,” Spahr said.

Small and Spahr are now looking for funding to offer the program more regularly. Spahr said the nature and amount of the funding would dictate whether the program remains free in the future or gets a cost attached to it.

She added, though, that seniors could call JF&CS at (412) 422-7200 now to get on the waiting list for any future Brain Builders programs.

(Eric Lidji can be reached at ericl@thejewishchronicle.net.)