



Brain Aerobics class stimulates the mind

By Kathy Laurenhue

Everyone I meet professionally—and nearly everyone I meet socially—is worried about the state of his or her brain. Virtually everyone over 50 seems to make self-deprecating jokes about “senior moment” memory lapses. (“I don’t have All-zheimer’s yet, but I have Half-zheimer’s!”)

For most of the last 15 years I have alternated my time between teaching people about dementia and teaching people “brain aerobics” or positive mind stimulation. Most people who turn to their doctors for advice are told to stimulate their brain power by doing crossword puzzles, taking up a musical instrument or learning a foreign language.

People who are good at crossword puzzles have an easy out, but crossword puzzles stymie me and lower my self-esteem. I dance and sing with enthusiasm, but am utterly devoid of musical talent, and much as I think Americans have an obligation to overcome our reputation for arrogance by learning a foreign language, I have studied 5 other languages during my lifetime and never gotten much beyond learning “Where is the bathroom?” in any of them. Experience has taught me that I am far from alone.

Keeping both mind and body active are key elements to successful aging. When we exercise our mind by doing or learning new things we are growing new dendrites. Dendrites are like the branches of a tree that extend our reach and help us make new brain connections. Like body fat that gives us protection in a famine, current theory suggests that the more brain connections we make in life, the more likely we are to have some “reserve” when faced with diseases that affect our brains. Learning new things also tends to make us feel good—more engaged in life.

My premise is that learning should be fun. It should *build* our self-esteem and self-awareness, not add to our stress or self-doubts. That is why I emphasize *positively* stimulating your mind, and why I tell

Brain Aerobics class

Format:

Each class begins with background on that week’s theme. Most of the time is spent giving participants opportunities to try out products that support the theme.

Week 1: The theory behind positive mind stimulation, discovering your strengths, using humor

Week 2: Visual designs on the mind

Week 3: Tapping both the logical left brain and creative right brain

Week 4: Words for the wise

Length:

Optimal class time is 90 minutes to 2 hours

Space:

Round tables and chairs facilitate the sharing of brain stimulating books and products

participants it’s as easy as finding something you love to do.

Start with humor

I typically teach Brain Aerobics once a week over 4 weeks. In the first week we discuss a few theories on the brain and learning, identify our strengths and talk about the role of humor in learning. The focus during weeks 2 through 4 is on visual designs, balancing the logical left brain with the creative right brain, and word games (but no crossword puzzles).

The greatest hindrance to building brain power is the false belief that it takes hard work and discipline. Learning to play an instrument or to speak a foreign language is hard work for most of us and *does* take discipline. But brain aerobics is about joy and enjoyment.

That’s why the Brain Aerobics classes begin with humor. Laughter is an easy-to-swallow brain vitamin. When we laugh, we bring oxygen to our brains and literally “freshen”

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Right-brain learner?

A person who prefers to use imagination (right brain), might enjoy being asked to “finish” this drawing:



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our thinking. We also relax when laughing, and relaxed learners, learn more. Tension inhibits retention. Furthermore, finding the funny side of any situation means thinking creatively. If we can think of something to laugh at about a given situation, chances are good that we can also think of other ways to face the challenges it represents.

Laughter lowers our cortisol levels, which means that it boosts our immune system, so that we are likely to be healthier in body as well as mind when we laugh. (For a quick summary of laughter’s benefits, go to www.helpguide.org/life/humor_laughter_health.htm). People who laugh easily tend to have a positive attitude toward life overall—another key element to successful aging.

Finding humor in a brain aerobics class consists of taking a humor survey to discover both what makes us laugh and what brings us pleasure and sharing our favorite jokes and humor resources. We also use tongue twisters.

Used by savvy speech therapists, tongue twisters force us to concentrate on our enunciation and usually to laugh at ourselves—and most of us take ourselves far too seriously.

- Try saying “Irish wristwatch” 3 times quickly.
- Or, if you are feeling daring, try this one:

I’m a sheet slitter. I slit sheets.
I am the best sheet slitter that ever slit a sheet.
If you need sheets slit; hire the best sheet slitter.

Tapping into intelligence

Another aspect of the Brain Aerobics class is to build self-esteem by discovering our strengths. There is an unfortunate tendency in today’s society to measure intelligence by how many academic degrees a person has and where he received them. Howard Gardner, author of *Frames of Mind* and *Intelligence Reframed*, suggests that there are multiple forms of intelligence that are not measured by standardized tests. For example, people with spatial intelligence

may have one or more of the following characteristics: They seldom get lost; like to “design” rooms (arrange furniture, paintings, accessories); can imagine what something will look like after it is built; and like to do jigsaw puzzles.

Similarly, people may have musical, logical, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal or intrapersonal intelligence.

Not very long ago, it was common to be told, “These are your strengths; these are your weaknesses. Here’s what you can do to work on your weaknesses.” (Most job performance reviews are still based on that format.) Now there are more business models like Marcus Buckingham’s *First, Break All the Rules* in which he advocates building on strengths. Why, if you are a person who loves nature—being outdoors or gardening or bird-watching or working with animals—would you want to build your brain power by learning to play a musical instrument?

On the other hand, if you are a person who loves music, there are endless directions your interest in music can lead you. The same is true of any of the other intelligences. Curiosity, endless curiosity, is of far greater use in building or maintaining brain power than any course of study.

The first class also attempts to build self-awareness by helping participants determine if they are primarily right or left brained. In *Aerobics of the Mind*, author Marge Engelman notes that the 2 sides of the human brain function differently. “The left hemisphere tends to work with facts, is logical and rational. It works with diagrams and data and sees letters. Language is learned here. The right hemisphere deals with feelings, imagination, intuition, creativity. The right side sees mental images, colors and is tuned into rhythm. It tends to be the artistic side.”

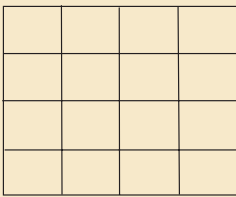
This description is overly simplistic, but most of us can easily say whether we prefer activities that deal with facts and logic or imagination and creativity.

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Left-brain learner?

A person who prefers to use the logical left brain would rather figure out an answer to this question: How many squares are there in the figure below?



(The answer is 30.)

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Explore intelligences with games

The sense of accomplishment that we have when we learn something new helps us feel more involved in the world, more “with it.” That is another reason to build on strengths. When we fail at learning something new, it tends to decrease our self-esteem, and makes us feel “out of it.”

In the Brain Aerobics classes, participants are given a chance to try out dozens of games and puzzles. They quickly learn what appeals to them and what doesn't. You'll find sources for these activities in the “Techniques and Tools” section of this article.

Some people enjoy making words from a given set of letters. “The Clock Game” by ElderGames consists of 12-letter phrases arranged in a circle with one letter substituting for each number on a clock. Participants make as many words as they can from any combination of the 12 letters. Each phrase has over 100 possibilities, many of which appear on the back of each card.



Putting the letters in a circle expands our thinking by disguising the original words. If we simply write “birthday cake” in a line, chances are we will always think of using the “c” as a hard “c” just as it is in “cake.” However, in a circle it is easier to look for other “c” sounds and combinations: ice, back, itch, edict.

Some people don't find such challenges appealing. They may like the “So I Says” game, which asks you to fill in a noun which is also a name:

“So I says to the girl watching the sunrise, I says _____” (Dawn) or,
“So I says to the guy who just won the lottery, I says _____” (Rich).

Others like books on word origins or word bloopers. Richard Lederer has written about a dozen books on the vagaries of the English language and mistakes made by translators,

medical transcriptionists, newspaper editors and others. For example: “The bride was wearing an old lace gown that fell to the floor as she walked down the aisle.”

All this is useful as an introduction to stimulating the mind in positive ways, but people with a passion for old cars or raising bromeliads are likely to find their own resources in museums, botanical gardens, on the Internet, in libraries or old bookstores. I encourage people to look with new eyes at games in toy stores and books in bookstores, and also to peruse museum gift shops and art and craft fairs, all of which are rich sources of items. The Nature Company and Discovery Stores also tend to have interesting products.

The bottom line? The brain craves novelty. Feed it. ■

Kathy Laurenhue is president of Wiser Now, Inc., a company that specializes in curriculum development and creative training related to aging issues (www.wiser-now.com). Laurenhue offers the Brain Aerobics Workshop directly to older adults or as a train-the-trainer class for professionals. Contact her by e-mail at Laurenhue@msn.com.

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Brain Aerobics techniques and tools

If you have access to the Internet, resources for stimulating your brain are limitless. Type in the word “Brain” and you will get more than 27 million references. Type in “Brain Teasers” and there are nearly 350,000 references. “Mind games” has nearly 16 million references and “puzzles” has more than 11 million. Go to www.Amazon.com and look up “brain teasers,” “mind games” or “thinking skills,” and you will have thousands of books to choose from. However, if you would like to start from a more manageable point, here are some of the resources used in the Brain Aerobics classes.

The books, games and puzzles here can be found in bookstores, retail outlets and also catalogs like MindWare (www.mindwareonline.com).

One warning about many of these board games: the cards to be read have extremely small type for aging eyes and may require a magnifying glass!

Optical illusions

Optical illusions, such as this one depicting an old woman, young woman and old man, appeal to nearly everyone. Good sources of optical puzzles are:

- The Art of Optical Illusions by Al Seckel, and
 - Can You Believe Your Eyes? by J. Richard Block and Harold Yuker
- (This illustration is reprinted with permission from J. Richard Block, co-author of *Can You Believe Your Eyes*, published by Brunner/Mazel, 1992.)



Express an opinion

One area everyone can succeed in is offering an opinion (you always have the right to it, even when others don't agree). Giving thought to an opinion on a new subject builds brain power, as does thoughtful listening to others' opinions. Two products ask us to choose a verdict in real court cases:

- You Be the Judge is a series of 4 books that encourages discussion and works well with imaginative right-brainers (ElderSong, www.eldersong.com)
- Judge for Yourself is a logical left-brain point-building game that focuses on right answers. However, with a 50/50 chance for success on every question (guilty or not guilty?), it's not high pressure.

Language lovers

Many authors write with wit, charm and often great humor on the vagaries of language. Look for books by:

- Bill Bryson: *Mother Tongue*, *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words*
- George Carlin: *Brain Droppings* (If you ignore his tendency to cuss, you'll find he's given a lot of thought to the English language!)
- Charles Earle Funk: *Horsefeathers & Other Curious Words and Heavens to Betsy! & Other Curious Sayings*
- Richard Lederer: *Pun and Games*, *Anguished English*, *Crazy English*, *More Anguished English*, *Fractured English* and *The Circus of Words*

Want to play word games with a group? Beyond Scrabble and Boggle, try:

- Crosswits
- Mad Gab
- Mystify
- Word Thief
- UpWords

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Will Shortz, known as the Puzzlemaster, has written numerous books that mostly involve fill-in-the-blank word games. There are also many word puzzles under various names (Word Winks, Wuzzles, Plexers, Frame Game) like the following. Can you tell what this says?

knee
lights

(neon lights)

Logical left brain ideas

For people who enjoy logic puzzles, you can find plenty of fodder with authors like:

- Allen Bragdon: Right Brain Teasers, Exercises for the Whole Brain, Brain Building Games
- Eugene Raudsepp: Creative Growth Games
- Paul Sloane: Lateral Thinking Puzzlers
- George Summers: The Great Book of Mind Teasers & Mind Puzzlers and Mind Bafflers
- Charles Barry Townsend: World's Greatest Puzzles

Board games include:

- Cranium
- MindTrap (2 versions)
- Stare
- Visual Brainstorms (2 versions)

Trivia treats

For those who enjoy books on trivia, here are a few suggestions:

- David Feldman: How Do Astronauts Scratch an Itch?, Do Penguins Have Knees? and Imponderables
- Bill McLain: Do Fish Drink Water? What Makes Flamingos Pink?
- Caroline Sutton: How Do They Do That?
- Stephen Jay Gould: The Panda's Thumb (and many others)

There are a number of activity books aimed at seniors who lived through events that younger people did not. The activities ask for answers to trivia-related to sports, movies, television shows, songs, historical events, etc., from the mid-20th century.

- ElderSong (www.eldersong.com or 800-397-0533) has a print and online catalog
- ElderGames, published by the National Council on Aging (www.ncoa.org; then go to "Publications" and scroll down or 800-373-4906)

Two other popular "senior activity catalogs" are:

- Nasco (www.enasco.com or 800-558-9595)
- Flaghouse (www.flaghouse.com or 800-793-7900 or 201-288-7600).

Trivial Pursuit is a popular board game for a general audience, but another most people aren't aware of is Fact or Crap, which is a somewhat more humorous version. You are asked to guess whether a statement is true or false (fact or crap). For instance, did Saddam Hussein study veterinary science in Egypt? (No, but he studied law there.) ▀