

BrainStorm launches first of three mind workout sessions

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Photo by Sue Suchyta. Cheryl Deep (left) and Donna MacDonald of Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology lead a brain fitness workshop Jan. 27 at Caroline Kennedy Library in Dearborn Heights. Additional BrainStorm sessions are scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Feb. 24 and March 30 at the library. For more information, call 313-791-3800 or go to dhcl.michlibrary.org.

By SUE SUCHYTA
Times-Herald Newspapers

HEIGHTS – When it comes to brain health, games bolster brain cells, socializing slows aging, and brain wrinkles are a good thing, according to BrainStorm experts from Wayne State University.

Cheryl Deep and Donna MacDonald of WSU Institute of Gerontology held “Brain Fitness,” the first of three BrainStorm sessions Jan. 27 at Caroline Kennedy Library, 24590 George St. “Secrets of a Powerful Memory” will be revealed at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 24, with “Social Interactions Boost Brain Health” scheduled for 6:30 p.m. March 30 at the library.

The interactive sessions present brain basics while challenging participants to try familiar tasks with a new twist, like writing their name backwards in mirror image form with their non-dominant hand, or doing the opposite of what "Simon says."

MacDonald said the greatest fears people have as they get older concern their health, their finances and losing their memory.

She said using your non-dominant hand – such as your left if you are right-handed – forces you to use the other side of your brain.

"By using your non-dominant side you start these cross connections over to the other hemisphere of your brain," MacDonald said. "The more connections we can make up there, the better off our brain is, because the other side is not being used nearly as much as your dominant side." She suggested trying to brush your teeth or hair, or using your computer mouse with your non-dominant hand.

Deep said adults become complacent and do things automatically that were new to us as children.

"Our brains are very lazy," Deep said. "Those connections that were fresh when you were blazing new trails as you are younger and learning things do become ruts, because that connection is so cemented in. It is so much more necessary now to shake your brain out of that and to force it to blaze new pathways and try to stimulate the production of brain cells."

MacDonald said recent medical discoveries have shown that the human brain continues to produce new neurons for our entire lifespan.

She said the findings of Dr. Lawrence Katz, a neurologist at Duke University, found that in addition to stimulating the brain with new activities to create new brain cells and connections, people need to reduce stress, which lowers damaging cortisol levels.

Katz also recommends more restful, uninterrupted sleep, more aerobic exercise, socializing, healthy food consumption, and eliminating nicotine.

Deep said the American Geriatrics Society reports that more than 100 prescription and over-the-counter drugs, from Aleve to Zantac, can worsen memory, and as we get older, it takes longer for the liver and kidneys to excrete medicine from the body.

Hydration is important, MacDonald said, and warned that excessive caffeine can lead to dehydration.

Deep said people have good and bad days with memory, which is affected by sleep, stress and medications, and individuals know their own baseline.

"Intermittent situations are not a big problem, but when you see consistent failure of what your memory used to be, you need to go get looked at," Deep said. "It may not be Alzheimer's, and there are other treatments that can reverse it."

"Everybody's afraid to go because they think it is going to be Alzheimer's and there is nothing they can do about it. You shouldn't make that assumption. It could be a vascular problem that could be treated and fixed, or it could be drug related."

Deep said the light of electronic devices, whether televisions, cell phones or laptops, stimulates the brain into thinking it is daylight, and people should avoid using them before going to sleep.

"It messes with your Circadian rhythm cycle," Deep said. "So the last hour before you are trying to go to sleep, don't look at any of that. Don't be even checking your phone for messages, because every time your brain sees that light it stimulates it."

She said while doing puzzles are important to brain health, exercise is just as important.

"Spend at least as much time exercising as you are puzzling, and you will do much more for your brain," she said. "You've got to get the blood and the oxygen to the cells. What is good for the body is good for the brain."

MacDonald said when people express memory loss concerns to her, she asks them if they'd experienced a life event like an illness or something stressful.

"Lifestyle things affect the memory first," MacDonald said. "I ask them if they've started any new medication. I always recommend they talk to their physician about it."

MacDonald said people are relieved that lifestyle changes can have a positive impact on their brain health.

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“Exercise and the socialization aspect are huge on brain health,” MacDonald said. “I think seniors are under a lot more stress because of financial (issues) going on.

“People thought their retirement years would be wonderful. They are having a lot more stress in their lives and are not dealing with it. People did not meditate or do yoga or do stress-relieving things in their generation.”

She said decision points about memory occur when you forget how to do tasks like using the buttons on a microwave oven.

“Losing your car keys is one thing, but not to figure out what the key is used for is another,” MacDonald said. “When you have stepped over that line of not knowing what objects are used for, I think it’s a serious issue.”

She said we forget whether we have done things, like lock the car, because we are distracted. She recommends we use environmental cues to help us remember to do things, like storing your keys in the same spot at home.

MacDonald hopes people remember that brain neurons can be regenerated.

“We can’t do anything about (aging), but we can make lifestyle changes, like exercising and socializing,” MacDonald said.

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