

Cross Train the Brain

In this edition I follow up on our look at *mental exercise*, part of the Third Pillar of Prevention. Lathrop residents have many well-traveled lanes of intellectual activity, but I am presenting a path of new challenge meant to bring continued stimulation and renewal to brain tissue. The brain of our youth was like a frontier landscape open for new experience. As we age we become like a majestic city built upon the foundations of countless generations- old Europe not the New World. And yet, with attention and commitment to our on-going urban renewal we can do a lot toward keeping the brain vibrant.

In looking for exercises, there are a few important principles to keep in mind:

- NOVELTY- find new ways to do routine things, or just try new things
- ENGAGE MANY SENSES- this is cross training, a method that builds broader links
- EMOTIONAL CONTEXT-including others or adding an element of excitement or discomfort strengthens the brain activity and its new “pathways”
- MAKE IT A GAME- turn little activities upside down just for fun

Here are some examples:

Perform common tasks with your non-dominant hand- eat, brush your teeth, shave, sketch a still life

Close your eyes (safety first) and- find your keys and unlock your door, get in your car and prepare to drive, first lay out your clothes and then dress blind.

Upset your routine – take a new route to a known place, shop at a new grocery store, build a meal from an Ethnic grocery (just across the bridge in Hadley), get your news from a different source, bath at the opposite time or eat breakfast for dinner.

Take a risk- sit with new people or at a new seat at dinner, cook an untried recipe for a potluck, take the bus to the movies and strike up a conversation with a stranger.

AND HERE ARE SOME POWER PLAYS (I am admittedly biased in this direction)

- Learn a musical instrument. Create some pressure by agreeing to a performance date. Find a chance to sing harmony. Add choreography. Kudos to the Young at Heart and the New Horizons band program. (big scores for visual, auditory, decoding a new language and wiring it into movement, adding breath, tuning one's experience with others, living with frustration and progress...)
- Practice Social Dance- learn new movement patterns within a sea of melody and rhythm, add the thrill and discomfort of partners. The English Country program at the Northampton campus is always looking for dancers. Does someone want to put together a session in Easthampton? Here is a recent Times article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/well/walk-stretch-or-dance-dancing-may-be-best-for-the-brain.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>.

- Gather a troupe of players – a staged reading of a play, with blocking and some simple costumes or a selection of silly hats. Or have the group each learn a poem by heart and share.
- And of course there is the thrill of competitive anything, but remember not something you are already skilled at. Is it time to learn chess or bridge? Playing the computer is one thing, but losing to your neighbor earns extra points. Start a movement to revive parlor games; a round of charades after dinner is the antidote for the brain sedative we know as television!