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The Newsletter from Family and Community Services
Banner Alzheimer's Institute
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Banner Alzheimer's Institute

August: The Month for Prevention

We've known for a while that exercising your body is good for you, but how about exercising your *brain*? Recent research demonstrates positive effects of mental exercise, particularly "cognitive training" exercises. In fact, it seems possible that cognitive training can enhance a person's ability to think and remember while also protecting against decline in the ability to perform activities associated with daily life.

Cognitively stimulating activities include crossword puzzles, reading, writing, or learning to do new things. Each of these may help your brain stay healthy by strengthening existing connections between brain cells and creating new ones. Cognitive training takes these activities one step further by providing formal instruction and strategies on ways to improve a person's ability in areas including memory, reasoning, or the speed in which information is processed.

One study with promising results is the "ACTIVE" study, a trial of different cognitive training interventions in older people who had little to no problem with memory or thinking. Participants received training to improve memory, reasoning and abstract thinking abilities, or the speed with which they processed information. The type of training offered in ACTIVE was generalized to everyday thinking situations. Older adults in the ACTIVE study are still performing better on tests of cognitive functioning five years after the initial training sessions. It is important to point out that the cognitive benefits are specific to each type of training. In other words, memory training only improves memory ability, and does not improve reasoning or the speed at which at individual processes information.

What about people who have memory loss already? Research suggests they can benefit from training designed to improve their reasoning or speed up their ability to process information. But they do not seem to benefit from the most commonly used types of memory training. And, we still do not know if cognitive training can prevent or delay the onset of more serious forms of cognitive decline, such as mild cognitive impairment (MCI) or Alzheimer's disease. It's also unclear whether people with more serious memory decline, such as Alzheimer's disease, benefit from training.

In addition to helping improve some aspects of memory and thinking, cognitive training may be useful for *preventing*, or postponing future decline in memory, thinking, and even functional abilities. Older adults who participated in the ACTIVE reasoning training program report that they are better able to perform activities associated with daily life, such as reading the warnings on a bottle of pills, five years after the study. We know that people who participate in cognitive training programs like ACTIVE have better cognitive functioning years after the training compared to those who do not participate.

Although most people have not had the opportunity to participate in cognitive training, great strides are being taken in order to change that. Several groups and companies are working on computerized versions of training programs for use in community centers or even your own home. Stay tuned, a cognitive training program may be available to you





“Ask the Expert” by Jan Dougherty, RN, MS

Dear Jan:

A member of my support group died before his wife, who suffers from dementia. The leader insisted this was not uncommon, due to the stress of caregiving. How can I keep this from happening to me?

— “Scared to Death!”

Dear Scared:

While it is not common for caregivers to die from stress-related illnesses, it is common for them to suffer physically and emotionally from chronic stress. Here are some tips to take better care of yourself:

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- Get adequate rest. Take a nap when your loved one naps.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Exercise at least three times a week.
- Let your doctor know you care for someone with dementia and monitor any pre-

existing conditions.

- Have your doctor screen and treat you for depression when it occurs.
- Get annual health screenings.
- Get flu/pneumonia vaccinations.
- Get out with friends and by yourself regularly.
- Make sure you have time alone each day.
- Use respite services, especially adult day programming, as often as possible.
- Attend support groups and keep in touch with professionals who can problem solve with you.

We can't guarantee that doing these things will make you live longer than your loved one with dementia, but it should improve the odds.

Jan Dougherty, RN, MS, is the director of Family and Community Services at Banner Alzheimer's Institute.



Book of the Month: *The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care* by Virginia Bell & David Troxel

The *Best Friends* model suggests that people with dementia need a friend – a *best friend*. This special person empathizes with their situation and helps the person feel safe and respected by remaining loving, positive and committed. The model teaches caregivers about caregiving knack, "the art of doing difficult things with ease," or "clever tricks and strategies."

Recommended for anyone who knows someone with dementia, the *Best Friends* approach is a caring, sensitive and thoughtful way to work with and care for those with memory problems. The authors provide practical examples of dealing with behavior problems, planning activities and, most importantly, being a "friend" to the person with Alzheimer's. *The Best Friends Book of Alzheimer's Activities* by the same authors is another great read for strategies on making activities meaningful and appropriate. The book contains 147 "grab and go" activities to use at home, in adult day centers, and in residential care settings. Both books are available in our BAI Community Library and at local bookstores!

Beacon Bits: Save the Date!

Research conference on Alzheimer's disease set for November 8, 2008

Syndicated *Dear Abby* columnist Jeanne Phillips will provide the keynote address at the Banner Alzheimer's Institute's second annual "Progress in the Fight Against Alzheimer's Disease: Promising Areas of Research" conference on Nov. 8 at the Arizona Grand Resort in Phoenix. The event is designed to update caregivers on the latest trends in Alzheimer's disease research. Presentations are crafted for care partners and the community-at-large and time will be set aside at the end of the day for a question and answer session with an expert panel. Ms. Phillips' mother Pauline Phillips, the original *Dear Abby*, has Alzheimer's disease. Stay tuned for more information on registering for this conference!

Our Mission

To end Alzheimer's disease without losing a generation, to set a new standard of care for patients and their families, and to forge a model of collaboration in biomedical research.