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OLDER AND WISER: Active minds lead to active seniors

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file photo Cindy Goodman, North Shore News

Would you believe it? Back to school signs are everywhere for students returning to school, college and university.

As seniors, we can breathe a sigh of relief at this time of the year, as our lives are no longer based around returning to school in the fall or visiting the stores to purchase school supplies. But for many reasons, after a relaxing summer, returning to some kind of learning can be a good thing for older adults. It can also be a time of anticipation and excitement if we enjoy learning as a lifelong activity.

Studies have shown that lifelong learning can promote social inclusion, active citizenship, personal development and self-sustainability. It can also decrease social isolation, keep our minds active, promote the sharing of ideas, develop our thinking skills, improve our memories and be a source of fun (let's not forget the importance of fun).

On the B.C. government's official website, regarding education and lifelong learning, it states: "Keeping our minds active is equally as important as keeping our bodies physically active. Lifelong learning means that we continue to learn new skills and gain knowledge throughout our lifetimes – an important part of healthy, active aging."

Learning isn't just about books and academics – it can be about learning a new skill like knitting or using an iPad. It can be about learning new dance steps or how to converse in a new language. Studies are showing that learning at any age is extremely beneficial for the brain.

On a seniors living blog Katherine Fowler states: "When you learn something new, your brain grows new cells and builds new connections which have proven benefits for problem-solving and memory skills. Learning can help improve cognitive ability and memory function and can help ward off Alzheimer's disease and dementia."

On the North Shore there are amazing ways to engage in lifelong learning activities. An older person can choose a course, program or activity at a community, recreation or seniors centre, the libraries, North Shore Elder College, and for those with a philosophical bent, a philosophers' cafe.

If you're looking for a smorgasbord of programs try North Shore Elder College, a program which was affiliated with Capilano University but has now successfully ventured out on its own. Courses and programs are very popular and affordable. Elder College has programs on current events, geological walking tours, book discussions, history and more. Registration opens in August – so try their web site at nseldercollege.org.

At your local community and seniors' centres, there is also a variety of courses offered including language classes, technology classes, book clubs, brain gym and arts and crafts. Check out Silver Harbour Centre, Parkgate, North Shore Neighbourhood House, or West Vancouver Seniors' Centre as they gear up for their fall programs.

Don't forget, along with learning, especially at a seniors centre, you get to meet new people and at the same time explore other options for connecting. Being socially connected is important for seniors – seniors who are socially connected increase their ability to age well. You can find these centres in the 2018 Seniors Directory published by the North Shore News in partnership with North Shore Community Resources Centre online at nscr.bc.ca.

Seniors programming can also be found at the North Shore libraries. Of course taking out a book or lounging at the library with a book or magazine can increase our lifelong learning. At the City of North Vancouver Library you can also join the popular Seniors Gathering which meets monthly about a variety of topics sure to stimulate your learning. For those with a technology interest but need support try Tech Connect Coaching: NVCL's Technology Training Program where you can book a free one-on-one appointment with a member of North Vancouver City Library's TechConnect team, to get personalized help with your smartphone, computer, library catalogue or other online services.

Challenge yourself this fall and take up something new – you won't regret it.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 48 years and has worked for and with seniors for 20 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome Email: lions_view@telus.net.

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