

## Smart ways to boost brain health



Summer is a time for relaxing over a good book, going for a nature walk, participating in an event, seeing friends or getting out in the garden.

Rejuvenated from the summer, the fall seems like a great time to try an activity or program to get those brain muscles back in gear.

Brain health – the ability to think clearly, learn, and remember – is an important factor in healthy aging for seniors. On their website, the Alzheimer’s Society states: “The brain is one of your most vital organs. It plays a role in every action and every thought, and just like the rest of your body, it needs to be looked after.”

In the North Shore Elder College Society’s latest newsletter, they concur, stating: “Just as the body can benefit from immersion in the mineral-rich waters of a spring, the mind can benefit from immersion in a rich cognitive and social environment”.

There are many activities that can keep our brains healthy: continued education, participating in fun activities like photography, trying new technologies, learning a new skill such as weaving, cooking or baking, reading and maybe discussing a book in a group, or playing a game like chess or bridge, are all ways that contribute to healthy aging.

Brain activities can increase cognitive ability, decrease isolation (remember being isolated for a senior is as bad as smoking 15 cigarettes a day), stimulate our neural pathways and increase our connectedness to community.

Besides keeping our mind active, there are several ways we can look after the brain: taking care of your health, eating healthy foods, being physically active, and staying connected.

On the National Institute on Aging’s website it says that researchers are looking at whether a healthy diet can help preserve cognitive function or reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s. For example, it states “there is

some evidence that people who eat a Mediterranean diet have a lower risk of developing mild cognitive impairment.”

On the same website, it says that physical activity benefits the brain as well. “In one study, exercise stimulated the human brain’s ability to maintain old network connections and make new ones that are vital to cognitive health.”

In the August 2019 Consumer Report, it presented a study showing “that every hour per day that people spent on doing light activity, such as slow walking or easy housework, corresponded with increased brain volume and 1.1 fewer years of brain aging over a three year period, compared with people who spent most of their time sitting.”

In the fall there appears to be a smorgasbord of activities available to keep your mind active. At your nearest seniors centre there are courses which stimulate the brain on any number of topics ranging from Spanish and computer classes at Silver Harbour, Keeping Connected: Creative Expressions at West Vancouver Seniors Centre, bridge and chess at Parkgate, social outings and events at Seniors Hub (Capilano Community Services) and the Social Conversations program and book discussions at North Shore Neighbourhood House.

At local libraries, you can take out a good book such as Brain Rules for Aging well: 10 principles for staying vital, happy and sharp by John Medina. Or you could try some of the programs they offer for seniors. The North Vancouver City Library offers the Seniors’ Gathering program once a week for discussions on timely topics, conversation and refreshments. Guest speakers have shared information on everything from transit tips and chocolate-making to downloadable ebooks and politics.

A North Shore senior can also choose a course, lecture, program or outdoor activity at North Shore Elder College. An advertised session which intrigued me was a 90-minute workshop (preregistration required) exploring the history of media, propaganda and deception called Mine Eyes Deceive Me: Why Seniors are Unwittingly Sharing More Fake News than Anyone! There are also a number of other courses and seminars available – visit [nseldercollege.org/fall-2019-courses](http://nseldercollege.org/fall-2019-courses) to find out more.

Though we think of gardening as a summertime activity, you could try planting fall and winter plants. Gardening, after all, is good for the soul and stimulates the senses. If you are having difficulties gardening, there is a new program called Garden Buddies run by Earthwise Society ([info@earthwisesociety.bc.ca](mailto:info@earthwisesociety.bc.ca) or call 604-946-9828) and funded by the United Way. The program pairs volunteers with seniors to work on new or existing garden projects at the senior’s home. It is a great way to share knowledge, keep up your skills and meet new people.

While it is great to kick back through these last days of the summer, don’t forget to sign up for fall activities. Your brain will be glad you did.