

Strengthen Your Mind Program: A Course for Memory Enhancement

By Kristin Einberger and Janelle Sellick. Baltimore, MD: Health Professions Press, Inc. 2010.

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Have you ever heard one of the nearly 78 million U.S. Baby Boomers say that they have “CRS disease” (Can’t Remember Stuff)? Or perhaps you have heard them say that they are having a “Senior Moment.” The truth is that executive control cognitive abilities such as scheduling, planning, dealing with ambiguity, multitasking, and working memory; are all affected by the aging process. The good news is research has showing that engagement in mentally stimulating activities is beneficial and may even ward off the development of dementia.

Research on cognitive changes with age has shown to be supportive of interventions used by professionals in Therapeutic Recreation. In 1990 an article by Clarkson Smith and Hartley, in the *Journal of Gerontology*, reported that playing bridge improved a person’s working memory and reasoning abilities. Another study was conducted by Basak and colleagues to assess the cognitive benefits of playing video games for improvement of cognitive functioning of older adults. Results showed significant improvement in executive functioning abilities following a minimum of 11 hours of game play. Video game companies seized the opportunity to use these findings and others before them to market their new brain training games. The video game companies have been very successful in their efforts to reach out to the aging public. So much so that the *New York Times* reported that between 2005 and 2007 the sale of brain exercise products increased from \$2 million a year to over \$80 million. Most recently, in March of 2010, the Research Partnership in Cognitive Aging awarded \$28 million dollars in grant funding to explore the neural and behavioral profiles of healthy cognitive aging and to design interventions that may reduce or reverse cognitive decline in older adults.

The authors of *Strengthen Your Mind Program: A Course for Memory Enhancement*, Einberger and Sellick, may want to get in line for some of this funding as they have brilliantly created a course that educates while also providing fun, interactive activities to strengthen cognitive functioning of older adults. The course is ready to implement without much preliminary set-up and is very easy to use.

The book includes 12 lessons that are each presented in a way that a novice or seasoned facilitator could easily use. Each lesson is designed to be completed in 90 minutes; however, more time may be necessary if implemented with a large group. A facilitator may be tempted to use bits and pieces of this course and not follow the designed layout. Caution is advised as the information in each lesson builds upon previous lessons and what participants have learned earlier in the course. It is suggested that the lessons be presented in order and that a minimum of 12 sessions be programmed in order to reap the most benefits. The lessons could be presented on a one-to-one basis, but it would

be best if there were more participants involved as discussion is a key component in the course. Each lesson is first presented with research-based information for the facilitator. This information helps to inform the facilitator of the science behind the activities and will aid in answering participants' questions. There is also a listing of tasks that should be completed prior to implementing the lesson. This includes becoming familiar with the facilitator overview, reviewing the supply list of what will be needed in the lesson, reviewing the step-by-step plan for implementation of the lesson. In addition, each lesson plan has a warm up, a quiz, practice activities, handouts and homework activities. One of the strongest components of the course is that it provides participants with a variety of learning experiences that are purposely designed to meet the different learning styles of participants. Aamodt and Wang (2008) have pointed out that "Unless the activities span a broad spectrum of abilities, there seems to be no benefit to general mental fitness" (p. 3). In this regard, the authors of *Strengthen Your Mind Program: A Course for Memory Enhancement* have assured that the activities are challenging yet can be successfully completed by participants of all ability levels and across various domains. This diversity can be seen across the 12 lessons presented in the book.

Lesson 1: Memory and Aging. This lesson acts as the foundation for what is to come in the course. Participants discuss what the normal changes in memory are, how the brain continues to grow new neurons (neurogenesis), how the brain has the capacity to learn new information at any age, and the three types of memory. Handouts of activities reinforce the various types of memory and offer the participants opportunities to strengthen their sensory, short term and long term memories.

Lesson 2: Learning Styles. Most people are aware that there are visual, auditory, and tactile/kinesthetic learning styles. What they may not be aware of is which type of learning style they prefer. This lesson aids participants in learning which style works best for them and how their learning style influences memory.

Lesson 3: Mental Aerobics. The importance of exercising the brain is presented in this lesson. The types of activities that stretch the brain are presented and participants are encouraged to do new things; or at least do the same things in a different way. Discussions revolve around ways in which memory is enhanced by exercising one's brain every day.

Lesson 4: Exercise. This lesson supports the idea of the mind-body connection. The importance of physical exercise (aerobics, strength training, and stretching) are presented and participants are introduced to how exercise is scientifically linked to improved cognitive functioning. Included are ways to incorporate exercise into everyday life. No strenuous exercise is included in this lesson, but discussions are focused on ways to stay motivated and the benefits for memory improvement that daily physical exercise offers.

Lesson 5: Strategies for Memory Improvement. This lesson is a summary of time-tested ways to improve one's memory. Presented in this lesson is information regarding attention, visualization, chunking out information for improved short term memory, using mnemonics, associating words with something familiar, repetition, creating stories, using visual cues, and utilizing the alphabet to enhance memory. There is much information in this unit and facilitators may want to divide this lesson into two sessions to allow for thorough practice of each of the methods presented.

Lesson 6: Brain Dominance. Are you left or right brained? This lesson presents basic information regarding the research on brain hemispheres, but then presents ways to use the whole brain to enhance memory. Activities include writing with your non-dominant hand, brainstorming, and ways to use the non-dominant side of your brain.

Lesson 7: The Five Senses. Lesson 1 presented the three types of memory and sensory memory was discussed as being the shortest of them all. This lesson presents ways to include sensory stimulation through sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell to increase information recall. Guiding participants to remember events or places where they experienced sensory memories, such as Christmas morning and the smell of the pine tree, reinforces how sensory information is used to remember or re-experience events or places. Participants are assigned homework that encourages them to practice using all of their senses to aid in memory improvement.

Lesson 8: Stress. The causes of stress are presented with discussion of good and bad stress being highlighted. Participants are placed in a mildly stressful situation and then guided through it. Discussion of how stress limits memory shows participants why it is important to manage stressors. The lesson ends with the introduction of ways to reduce stress and homework that is fun but not stressful.

Lesson 9: Optimism and Humor. Research findings on the physical and social benefits of being optimistic are presented. Coping mechanisms are discussed and ways to nurture optimism are shared. Similarly, research on the benefits of humor and laughter are offered. Participants have opportunities to explore how optimistic they are and how much they are currently using humor in their lives. Ways in which optimism and humor aid memory are discussed.

Lesson 10: Nutrition. This may seem like an odd topic to include in a course on memory, but the authors do a good job of presenting research that links the two together. Nutritional components of food that have been shown to be beneficial for the brain such as antioxidants and Omega-3 fatty acids are presented. Information is presented that explains the importance of eating enough fruits and vegetables each day for improved memory. Other keys to improved memory through digestion of food are presented with a few surprises tossed in. Can you say coffee?!

Lesson 11: Socialization. An alternative title for this lesson could be entitled "Use it or lose it." This lesson makes sense if you remember that a person needs to stretch their memory each day. Talking with other people forces the brain to pay attention, recall facts, and catalog new information. The authors present research on the importance of having a social network as one ages and encourage participants to remain engaged in socially stimulating activities to ward off mental declines.

Lesson 12: Memory-Enhancement Course Review. Summarizing everything that has been presented, this lesson pulls all the pieces together. Participants are reminded of the key information that was presented in each lesson. There is even a certificate of completion that can be used to celebrate participants' completing the course. The activities in this unit are offered as a fun way to review all that has been learned in the course.

After reading this book and reviewing the activities, I highly recommend this book to any professional working with older adults. The course would be good for aging Baby Boomers who are concerned about losing their memory. Activity professionals working in adult daycare, assisted living, long-term care, and nursing homes should definitely pick up a copy of this book. It offers an easy to use, inexpensive, and complete program on memory enhancement. The best part is that the outcomes are nearly guaranteed.

REFERENCES

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