

chicagotribune.com

55 Plus @ home

Retirement communities' newest amenities? Brain-fitness labs

By Jane Adler

Special to the Tribune

February 22, 2009

Sally Kimble doesn't sweat her workouts. Instead of pumping iron at the gym, she flexes synapses at a brain-fitness lab in her Evanston retirement community.

Five days a week, for 90 minutes, she interacts with a computer. It prompts her to distinguish between certain sounds. The more answers she gets right, the more difficult and quicker the listening tasks become until she finally has to listen to a conversation and recall its content.

The idea is to exercise the brain and increase auditory-processing speed. That could eventually improve the ability to remember names, and follow conversations in a crowded room—common challenges for older people.

"The program takes real concentration and discipline," said Kimble, who lives at Westminster Place, a continuing-care project run by the Presbyterian Homes. "I've noticed a real improvement in my ability to recall things."

About 400 retirement communities nationwide feature brain-fitness programs, according to a recent report by SharpBrains, a San Francisco-based research firm. Retirement communities are on the cutting-edge of brain fitness efforts because many residents demand the systems, said SharpBrains co-founder Alvaro Fernandez. Brain-fitness programs also can be found at some libraries, said Fernandez, and senior centers are starting to show interest in them too.

Among the first 135 residents at the Presbyterian Homes to use the program, there was a 44 percent improvement in their brain-fitness scores, although it's difficult to judge whether that translates into a better quality of life.

Most of the evidence is anecdotal. Residents report that they can concentrate better and hear better, according to Jane Grad, vice president at Presbyterian Homes. They can track a television program and follow the dialogue easier. "It has a lot to do with concentration and focus," she said.

Scientists say older people who practice brain gymnastics actually can forestall memory loss, and improve their mental function. However, the brain games need to focus on novelty, variety and challenge, says Fernandez, who runs the SharpBrains Web site. Doing one more crossword puzzle every day won't help. But learning a foreign language will, says Fernandez.

Experts also point to the secondary benefits of brain fitness: Residents who participate in the training aren't sitting alone in their apartments. Lack of socialization is thought to be a big factor in mental decline. The programs also give residents something positive to do to combat their worries about failing memory. Says

resident Kimble, "I'm trying to improve my circumstances."

Good nutrition and physical exercise are probably just as important to mental sharpness as brain workouts, says Dr. Roger Landry, a physician and president of Masterpiece Living, a provider of senior wellness programs based in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. But early results show that cognitive training can help improve daily functioning, Landry says. "It's an entire lifestyle to stimulate the brain."

The Seasons at Glenview Place in Northbrook is part of a yearlong pilot program by Brookdale Senior Living, the owner of the building. The company has installed brain-fitness computers in seven of its large retirement communities. About 300 residents take part in the program, according to Sara Terry, a Brookdale vice president in Chicago.

Brookdale uses a fitness program by Dakim (dakim.com). It's been so popular with residents that Brookdale recently added another brain-fitness computer at each community to meet demand. "People really enjoy them," said Terry.

The Presbyterian Homes uses a brain-fitness program from Posit Science, also available from its Web site, positscience.com.

house&homes@tribune.com

Copyright © 2009, Chicago Tribune