

The Philosophy Behind Wiser Now's Brain Aerobics Booklets



by Kathy Laenhue, M.A.

Introduction



My philosophy related to brain aerobics can be summarized in three words:

- Ha-ha
- Ah-ha
- Aaaahhh

I want people who attend my workshops or purchase my brain aerobics/mind play booklets to first of all, laugh and have fun because relaxed learners learn more. That's the ha-ha. Second, I want to foster curiosity so they learn new information – that's the ah-ha. Third, I want them to get lost in the pleasure of doing something they really enjoy. That's the aaaahhh.

All that follows in this brief booklet is an expansion of those three thoughts.

Reducing stress

Like most adults past the age of 40, I have experienced major challenges in my life, and am therefore well acquainted with the frustrations that tend to pop up and increase our stress as we:

- forget appointments, groceries, and items on our "to do" lists
- find ourselves tripping more or running into things
- misplace glasses and keys
- become stymied by even relatively simple decisions
- have "straw that broke the camel's back" moments that take us by surprise.

As we age, our thinking and reflexes tend to slow down a bit, which is why you don't see old people on game shows with buzzers. (My personal theory is that we're slower because we have much more stuff in our brains to sort through than young whippersnappers.) Many people also have more trouble remembering names. But that's about it in terms of learning challenges.

For most people as they age, forgetfulness is about lack of attentiveness – just as it is in younger people. Children forget things all the time because they are concentrating on what interests them rather than remembering, for example, to bring a sweater home from school. Most of us forget names because we don't pay close attention when we are first introduced. We forget items on a grocery list because we get distracted by the cooking demonstration on aisle six.



As they age, most people will not develop dementia (defined as a set of symptoms related to cognitive decline, only one of which is memory impairment). For most people, the ability to continue learning is a lifelong skill. Therefore, if you think your brain is turning to mush, the cause is much more likely to be stress than a brain disorder, and my form of brain aerobics may be the most palatable treatment.

What the doctor orders

If you tell your doctor that you are worried about your memory, the top three things he or she is likely to suggest are:

- Do crossword puzzles
- Take up a musical instrument
- Learn a foreign language



All of these things do indeed stimulate the brain, but, personally, I am spectacularly inept at all three. I have a variety of talents, but those three are not among them. When doing presentations, I always survey my audiences, and I have learned I am not alone in my ineptitude. But the bigger problem with these ideas is that unless any of them represents something fun for you to do, they *add* to your stress rather than diminish it. If you are already frazzled by too long days and too many responsibilities, how the heck are you going to fit in learning to play a bassoon?

My goals

I approach mind-stretching activities with the three goals of helping others to:

- Reduce stress (Relaxed learners learn more)
- Have fun (Laughter brings oxygen to your brain to literally “freshen” your thinking) and
- Build self esteem (by exploring your strengths and interests)

I aim for the games and exercises I create to be a means of both engaging your brain and becoming engaged with others. I hope you will make new connections in your brain, but I also hope you will make stronger connections with the people in your life. The exercises are intended as props for building relationships by providing new topics for discussion, new knowledge and promoting the sharing of past experiences and wisdom gained. Current research suggests that a 10-minute conversation can be as stimulating to our brains as doing a crossword puzzle. I hope these exercises help you to have more conversations that enhance your sense of well-being.

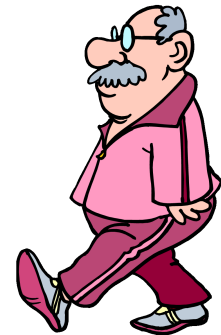
My goals do *not* include making you smarter, or improving your memory or response time. I want to change your experience of learning by making it more fun; I don't want to change you. You already have many strengths.



Within the publication I occasionally mention scientific research. If you are interested in learning more about the science of the brain, one user-friendly, free resource is the Dana Foundation (<http://www.dana.org>).

Maintaining your brain has many aspects

It is good to keep your mind stimulated, but that alone will not lead you to a healthy old age. More and more research on healthy aging emphasizes physical exercise. Exercise helps bring oxygen to the brain; it also keeps your body working. Lifting weights improves muscle strength; some exercises like yoga and Tai chi improve flexibility and balance, which are hugely important as we age. Do what you enjoy – swim, take a bike ride – but keep moving.



One of the easiest and best exercises – in part because it’s a weight-bearing exercise – is walking. It can be done anywhere, but is especially useful when it is done outdoors. Many older adults are deficient in vitamin D, which is essential for metabolizing calcium to maintain bone health. While it is true that vitamin D can be taken in pill form, my colleague and friend, Betsy Brawley, author of two books on design for long-term care (See Resources) explains the benefits of 10 minutes of daily natural sunlight exposure this way: “Studies indicate that inadequate light exposure, required for calcium metabolism, results in decreased bone mass and contributes to falls and fractures . . . Even people with high dietary vitamin D intake show calcium deficiencies when they don’t get enough sun.”

The single most important thing you can do to keep your mind active is to keep your body active.

There are other logical factors which contribute to healthy aging, such as eating a nutritionally balanced diet. No surprise. But what experts are also finding is that things you might not expect also matter:

- A cheerful attitude
- Optimism
- Resilience
- Socialization – surrounding yourselves with people who love and value you and whom you love and value.



All of these can be cultivated. Start working on those aspects of your garden.



Growing dendrites

Dendrites are the tree-like “branches” in our brains that help us link and retrieve information. We make them grow and interlock by *doing* and *learning* new things. When you answer questions you know, you are reinforcing old pathways in the brain, which is fine; but when you have a new experience or learn new facts, you are building fresh pathways in your brain – growing new dendrites – which is even better. Each brain aerobics booklet (except those devoted solely to trivia quizzes or word games) has lots of questions related to opinions and experiences that anyone can answer, but each also has questions with answers that perhaps you can only guess at. Looking up the answers, checking your facts, helps you grow new dendrites.

Expanding our knowledge and interests not only helps our brains, but contributes as well to an overall positive attitude toward life.

Humor builds brain power

One of the most overlooked brain builders is humor. Humor helps us grow new dendrites because it unleashes creativity. Think about it. Comedians see the funny side of ordinary situations; they look at life from a different angle. If you see a problem as a dark, gloomy cloud hanging over you, coming at it from a new angle is like poking a ray of sunshine through it. Once you have poked one ray of sunshine into the problem, you can often see other potential solutions that poke more sunshine at the problem, and soon that cloud isn't so dark. One of my favorite expressions is:

Fun fuels the brain.

Here are some other benefits of using our sense of humor:

- As noted earlier, laughter draws oxygen to the brain, thus bringing “fresh air” to our thinking.
- Laughter lowers our levels of cortisol, thus boosting our immune system.
- Laughter is good exercise. It stimulates our heart and lungs and temporarily improves breathing capacity.



A prominent doctor discovered that cheerful people resist disease better than chronic grumblers.

He concluded that the surly bird gets the germ.

~ Lorin Whittaker in *Laugh Away Your Tension*

As the above quote indicates, using your sense of humor is as much about maintaining a cheerful attitude as it is about laughter. When you are stressed, sitting down with a book of jokes or cartoons or funny pictures for just five or 10 minutes can help you return to a task refreshed. One of the books I recommend

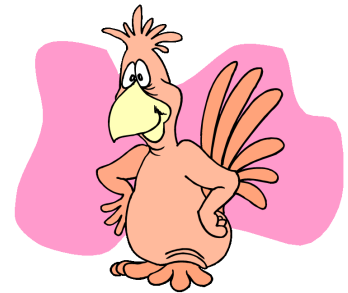


for this practice is the Reader's Digest compilation of columns from *Life in These United States* (See Resources.)

Virtually anyone who has survived any tragedy (or is still dealing with a difficult situation) will tell you, "I couldn't have done it without my sense of humor." But many of us still have doubts about its benefits; we feel self-indulgent for taking that break, for having that irreverent thought, for laughing in the face of tragedy. One of the best books I know to counteract those self-doubts is Allen Klein's *The Courage to Laugh*. (See Resources.)

Our sense of humor is the best coping skill we've got. It's a momentary defiance of reality, and it gives us hope. It deserves to be cultivated. And remember, no one ever said you had to learn something serious to make your dendrites grow.

On the following page is a humor survey. Ask yourself the questions in it, and when you have defined what cheers you, make sure you take time for those activities each day.



Humor Survey: What makes you laugh?



- Do you think you have a good sense of humor?
- Was humor and laughter valued in your family when you were growing up? Who set the example for you of a good sense of humor?
- Did you have a favorite toy or game as a child? What was it?
- Do you remember the jokes you told as a child? Were they nonsense jokes or knock-knock jokes or more sophisticated? Do you remember any?
- Have your tastes changed in terms of what you think is funny as the years pass?
- Who is the friend or relative in your life now who makes you laugh most? What is special about him or her?
- Who is one of your favorite comedians?
- Are there comedy shows on television that you especially like? Which ones?
- Name one of your favorite comedy movies.
- Do you read the comics in the newspaper? Which strips do you enjoy?
- Do you enjoy song parodies? Can you sing one?
- Is there a joke that always makes you laugh? Share it.
- Are there certain kinds of humor that offend you? (Jokes that make fun of religion, politics, ethnic or racial groups, gender, married life or one's sex life, bathroom humor?) What do you do when someone tells such a joke?
- What else makes you laugh? (Watching grandchildren, pets, animals in the zoo)
- Have you ever been in a place where everyone was tense and angry and someone tried to break the tension with a joke? Did it work? Were you the joke-teller?
- Have you ever used humor to help clear your head for better problem-solving? Describe what happened.
- Have you ever used humor to help stimulate your creativity? Talk about it.
- Laughter eases stress, but many people choose other ways to relax. They find pleasure in pursuing a favorite hobby, going for a walk or playing a sport, getting together with friends and so on. What activities bring you pleasure?

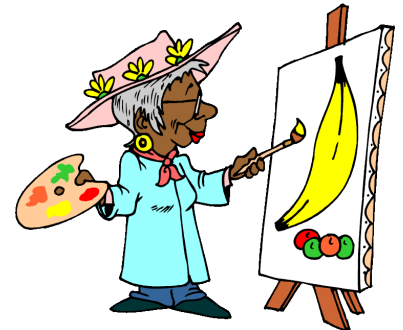


The integrated mind

In *Aerobics of the Mind*, (See Resources) author Marge Engelman notes that the two sides of the human brain function differently.

The **left hemisphere** tends to work with facts, is logical and rational. It works with diagrams and data and sees letters. Language is learned here.

The **right hemisphere** deals with feelings, imagination, intuition, creativity. The right side sees mental images, colors and is tuned into rhythm. It tends to be the artistic side.



This description is overly simplistic, especially as we learn more and more about crossover skills. Nevertheless, it *is* true that most of us can easily say whether we prefer activities that deal with facts and logic or imagination and creativity.

The late Gene Cohen, MD, PhD, author of *The Mature Mind*, (See Resources) suggested that as we age, the two hemispheres of our brain become more integrated. He proposed that one reason our response time is slower as we age is that we are checking in with both sides of our brain. We weigh decisions both logically (left side) and intuitively (right side).

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences

Even integrated brains, however, have individual strengths. A decade or two ago, an educator named Howard Gardner developed a theory that suggested there are many forms of intelligence not measured by most school testing. (See Resources.) Following are his categories of intelligence with a few examples of what each means. (Each category has many more possibilities; if you think you have a particular form of intelligence, you probably do, even if you can't check off most of the examples listed.)

Check off all the strengths you see in yourself. Do any surprise you?

Spatial Intelligence:

- You seldom get lost.
- You like to design new arrangements of furniture.
- You can imagine what something will look like after it is built.
- You like to do jigsaw puzzles.
- You know whether or not a glass will overflow if you empty the rest of the milk bottle into it.

Musical Intelligence:

- You sing, hum or whistle often.
- You remember tunes easily.
- You hear rhythm in everyday sound.



- You play one or more instruments.
- You have composed music.



Logical-Mathematical Intelligence:

- Puzzles and games are easy for you to master.
- Doing math is fun for you. (You may be addicted to Sudoku.)
- You are fascinated by machines.
- You like to solve mysteries.
- You tend to win arguments.

Linguistic Intelligence:

- You love words.
- Poetry is like music to you.
- You have a large vocabulary.
- You have written short stories, poetry or a novel.
- You speak, read or understand several languages.

Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence:

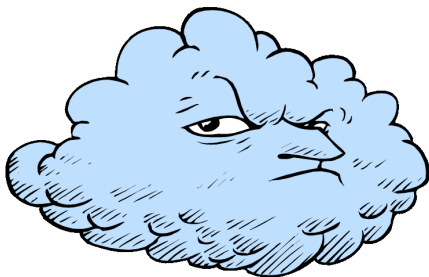
- You enjoy activities where you can move about.
- You seldom injure yourself while exercising.
- You learn dance steps quickly.
- You would rather make something than read about it.
- You prefer to play sports rather than watch others play.

Intrapersonal Intelligence:

- You understand who you are.
- You know your strengths.
- You know your weaknesses.
- You know what you want.
- You are in control of your emotions most of the time.

Interpersonal Intelligence:

- You understand other people very well.
- You often become the leader in any group you join.
- Other people tend to come to you for advice.
- You want to improve the human condition.
- You work well in a group.



Naturalist Intelligence:

- You notice patterns in nature.
- You know what the weather is supposed to be like and watch the weather channel for pleasure.
- You know the names of many animals and plants.
- You recognize and classify minerals.
- You know what the phase of the moon is.

This list has been adapted from *Mind Games* by Kathryn Wetzel, Ph.D. and Kathleen Harmeyer, MS. © 2000. (See Resources.)

Think about Mr. Gardner's theory.

- What strengths did this survey reveal about you that you might not have thought of as a form of intelligence?
- Do you think Mr. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is missing any categories? If so, which ones?
- Do you have strengths that don't seem to fall into any of his groupings? Give examples.

The purpose of this exercise is to identify, and then build on, your strengths. Marcus Buckingham wrote a business management book called *First, Break All the Rules* (See Resources), in which he said that it was counterproductive to point out an employee's weaknesses during an annual evaluation and ask him to concentrate on those during the upcoming year. If we are born with strengths, we ought to nurture and channel them; they are our gifts to our fellow human beings. We can then collaborate with people who are strong in the areas where we are weak and create synergy – a sum that is greater than its parts – with our joint efforts.

If you love gardening, for example, you are likely to expand your knowledge and positively stimulate your brain by concentrating on that interest. You might:

- Read more books about gardening both to learn more and please your eye with beautiful illustrations.
- Learn the Latin names of flowers (learning a foreign language!)
- Plan the contents of a garden (using your imagination and creativity to determine color, varieties, varying heights of plants).
- Plot the garden (requiring math skills for determining how much space for each type of plant and how many plants in each space).
- Revise your plans for each season of the year.
- Consider what you can do in your garden to alleviate global warming.
- Join a garden club or share flowers with your neighbors to nurture friendships.
- Plan healthy meals around a vegetable or herb garden.



The possibilities are endless.

Whatever your strengths are, think of how you can use them to positively stimulate your mind. The “positive” is important because **tension inhibits retention**. If we don't like a subject or don't think we're any good at it, it is much harder for the information to get through. We have literally closed our mind to that exercise or project. We are also less likely to do it both because we don't want



our lack of confidence in that particular ability reinforced by proving how bad we are, and we don't want to feel guilty for not doing something we're not good at!

Does that mean you should never try anything new or challenging? Of course not. But you are more likely to tackle something challenging if it falls somewhere in your interest range. You may lack confidence in math, for example, but if you want to plot out a garden – to create something you love – you will be more likely to do the math that project requires. Whenever possible, relate practice in what you don't love to something you *do* love.

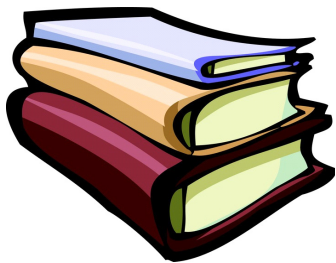
And again, collaborate. If you are having trouble plotting the garden, turn to a fellow gardener who has that strength and can help you. Nurturing friendships, as noted earlier, is also good for the aging brain.

Variety is the spice of life

One of the most interesting research findings in recent years related to keeping our minds active is the need for variety. If you do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle daily, I applaud you for a skill I lack, but I will also encourage you to look for other ways to keep your curiosity aroused and your brain engaged. If we do the same thing day after day, we are creating ruts in our brains rather than new pathways. One of the strengths of *Wiser Now's* brain aerobics/mind play booklets is that they offer broad subject matter in multiple formats – trivia quizzes, word games, imaginative exercises and discussion topics. Plus, they are easily printed out, available at your finger tips whenever you are ready for their challenges and delights.

What's next?

In my seminars, the previous pages are just the beginning. I then go on to give examples of a wide variety of games and exercises (and pass out lots of products to try). Whatever means you choose to keep your brain happily active, I wish you well on your journey.



Resources

Many of the *Wiser Now* brain aerobics/mind play booklets include hyperlinks to buy any resources listed on Amazon. On the ***Creative Mind Play*** CDs, listed under the *Wiser Now* resources there is also a file called “Hyperlinks” that is an alphabetical list of all the purchasable resources mentioned, including the ones below. If you are reading this offline, you can still purchase them through your local bookstore or by accessing the Internet on your own.

Following are the ones mentioned in this booklet. Click on the blue links to learn more about them and/or purchase them.



- *Aerobics of the Mind* by Marge Engelman is a book I admire by a woman I admire. She has written several other related works, all of which are available from the Attainment Company catalog:
<http://www.attainmentcompany.com/xcart/home.php?cat=292>
- [*The Courage to Laugh*](#) by Allen Klein. © 1998. Mr. Klein is also the author of *the Healing Power of Humor* and a number of books of uplifting quotations. I would recommend any of his books, but *Courage* has been most meaningful to me in my work.
- [*Designing for Alzheimer's Disease, Strategies for Creating Better Care Environments*](#) © 1997 and [*Design Innovations for Aging and Alzheimer's*](#) © 2006 by Elizabeth C. Brawley. Although Alzheimer's disease is Betsy's particular passion, she is one of the world's finest advocates for creating supportive environments for all aspects of aging.
- [*First, Break All the Rules*](#) by Marcus Buckingham. New York: Simon & Schuster, ©1999. Marcus Buckingham is a delightful and sought-after speaker who followed this book with [*Now, Discover Your Strengths*](#). They are written for the business market, but contain good advice for other aspects of life as well.
- Howard Gardner's first book on multiple intelligences was published in 1993; in 2006 it was completely updated and published as [*Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*](#). Howard Gardner is a prolific author and highly-regarded educator, and in his [*Five Minds for the Future*](#), he talks about even more variations on traditional measures of intelligence, such as creating, ethical and synthesizing minds.
- [*Life in These United States*](#) is compilation of columns by that name from *Reader's Digest* magazine that was published in 1996. The monthly *Reader's Digest* magazine still features that column, but to my knowledge, there have been no other editions of the book.
- [*The Mature Mind*](#) by Gene Cohen, MD, PhD. © 2005. Dr. Cohen wrote about older adults with affection and about the aging brain with clarity, both of which are refreshing to find. Also check out [*The Creative Age*](#) from 2001.
- *Mind Games, The Aging Brain and How to Keep It Healthy* by Kathryn Wetzel, Ph.D. and Kathleen Harmeyer, MS. © 2000. Like Marge Engelman's *Aerobics of the Mind*, I have been promoting *Mind Games* in all my seminars since it was first published. It's a book that balances insights with exercises that illustrate the points it makes. It also offers



quick synopses of complex theories, summarizing, for example, Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory with the survey adapted in this publication + another 20 pages of interesting examples. It is available through Barnes&Noble rather than Amazon:

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Mind-Games/Kathleen-Harmeyer/e/9780766812802/?itm=1>

While these are a few of the resources that have informed my philosophy about brain aerobics, others can be found on the website www.wisernow.com and in a separate booklet, "**A Few of My Favorite Resources.**" I also regularly recommend websites, games, books and the work of people and organizations I admire on my blogs www.MindMusings.com and www.CaregiverCheer.com.

More Wiser Now Resources

Do you want more mind-stimulating material?

Check out the ever-growing list of booklets available through the Wiser Now store (<http://shop.wisernow.com/>).

Then consider doing the following:

- Order the ***Creative Mind Play*** CD series from Health Professions Press (<http://www.healthpropress.com/store/laurenhue-29647/index.htm>), also based on archived material from ***Brain Aerobics Weekly***.
- Order Kathy's book, ***Getting to Know the Life Stories of Older Adults, Activities for Building Relationships*** also from Health Professions Press (<http://www.healthpropress.com/store/laurenhue-925x/index.htm>).
- Check out her blog at www.MindMusings.com.

Is there an older adult to whom you would like to send ongoing joy?

Sign up for **Letters for Elders** to send that person twice weekly friendly letters that arrive via the U.S. Postal system in brightly colored envelopes. Learn more at www.Letters4Elders.com.

Are you a caregiver?

You can find both useful advice and compassionate reassurance at Kathy's website www.WiserNowAlz.com and her blog www.CaregiverCheer.com. Check out the material there, including her very practical and upbeat books on Alzheimer's caregiving, which are also available on Kindle.

Do you have staff development needs?

- Kathy gives active aging workshops and also trains trainers, specializing in brain aerobics, life stories, creative training techniques, dementia care, medical staff sensitivity, and communication tips.



- Order “22 Creative Training Tips to Use Instantly” at <http://shop.wisernow.com/>.
- Kathy has a master’s degree in instructional technology and has developed multi-media curricula for corporate clients for more than 20 years.

She can be reached by writing to kathy@wisernow.com or calling 800-999-0795 (weekdays 9:00 – 5:00 Eastern time).

Do you need a speaker or workshop leader who can provide fun and stimulating brain activities for keeping minds active and socially engaged?

Kathy loves to do so and can be reached by writing to kathy@wisernow.com or calling 800-999-0795 (weekdays 9:00 – 5:00 Eastern time). Details are also provided under “presentations” at www.WiserNow.com.

Are you a media representative needing an interview subject/press release?

Here are some of Kathy’s topics:

- Why having fun enhances learning
- The #1 thing you can do to maintain brain health
- Why crossword puzzles aren’t the answer to maintaining your brain
- How stress jams brain function
- Fast and fun techniques for discovering your employees’ (or friends’/families’) values
- Reminiscence and creative memory
- Why resourcefulness is more important than resources
- The sense of humor in people with dementia
- Alzheimer’s disease: Stop the fear-mongering
- The logic behind illogical behavior in people with dementia

