

Using Wiser Now's Brain Aerobics Booklets Effectively One-on-One and in Groups

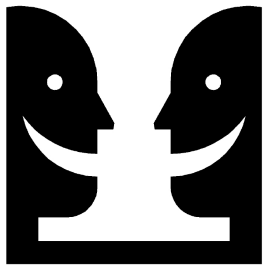


by Kathy Laenhue, M.A.

Introduction

Note: Although this document has some things in common with the booklet on “Adapting Brain Aerobics Booklets for People with Dementia,” it is assumed here that the people you are working with do not have memory impairments.

First lesson: The goal is conversation and connection



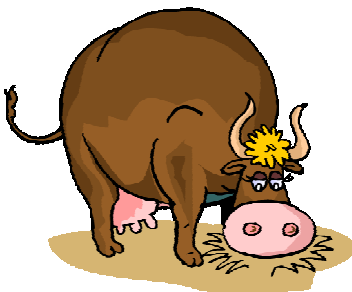
I don't like to be tested. I suspect most people don't. I do like learning new things and seeing the logic behind solving problems. Again, I suspect I am not alone. Most of all, I like the give and take of sharing ideas and answers with others, and in that I *know* I am not alone. **My primary goal in creating the Brain Aerobics Booklets is to provide a prop for helping people to connect with one another.**

I want people to have more to talk about than the weather, and I want them to have fun learning new things or seeing old things in new ways, partly by sharing their experiences. Each booklet is intended to provide interesting information and conversation starters. It's true that the trivia and word sections are quizzes, but even they are there primarily to provide another way of presenting information or thinking about a concept. The exercises can be done individually, but they are much more fun – and you are likely to gain many more insights – when you do them with others.

If your goal is to build brain power, there are a number of worthy companies offering computer-based products that claim success in doing so through a series of tests taken three times a week or more. If your goal is to build brain power, constant testing is essential. Although I hope your brain will be enriched by the Brain Aerobics Booklets, my goal is to build relationships.

Second lesson: Knowing all the answers, *isn't* the goal

You will not know all the answers to all the questions in the quizzes. I understand the satisfaction in knowing right answers, but if one of my goals is stimulating your brain to learn something new, it's contradictory to create quizzes only about things you already know.



I have written in the past about cow paths in our brains. I am told that cows tend to create meandering paths as they look for clover and other grazing treats on their way back to the barn or on their way to the far pasture. Once the path is created, it soon becomes a rut because even though it isn't the most



direct route, it has become a *familiar* route. When we retrieve information we already know from the circuits in our brains, we are reinforcing those pathways – creating ruts. That’s not a bad thing; after all, we *want* to be able to recall names and the way to get home and thousands of other details.

But according to current research, one key to aging well involves creating as many pathways in our brains as possible; we want to make *new* connections so that if some connections are lost or damaged, alternative routes are possible. The branches in our brains that make these connections are called dendrites, and we grow new dendrites whenever we learn or experience something new. Thus, new learning trumps old knowledge.

One of my biggest challenges is getting readers to understand that learning new things, not coughing up old answers is success. On the other hand, I don’t like frustrating readers, which is why the answers to the trivia quizzes and word games are always printed at the bottom of the page, making the solutions easy to look up – that is, making it easy to learn something new.



If members of your group are worried that they don’t know the answers, remind them that they aren’t supposed to; the point is to be exposed to *new* information *and* to have fun doing it, because relaxed learners learn more!

Third lesson: Slow down and have fun

Knowing that the goals are connecting with others and learning new things is vital to presenting the content in a way that boosts the element of fun. **Fun fuels the brain.**

The information in these booklets is meant to be read and discussed at leisure. Someone who is reading the trivia quiz on her own can easily complete it in 5 – 10 minutes, but the pleasure of the quiz comes from sharing it with others, discussing the content and adding one’s own opinions and related knowledge.

I often make the point that the reason you don’t see a lot of older adults on game shows is that our reaction time has slowed; it’s not that we don’t know the answers, but we simply can’t hit that buzzer as quickly as our younger counterparts. We also are more likely to weigh our answers more thoughtfully, engaging both our logical left brain and intuitive right brain. Take advantage of that more leisurely thought pace in doing the exercises in the booklets. Take them on car trips, to dental waiting rooms, to restaurants. In group settings, slow down and get to know one another through the conversation generated.

If you want to have fun with the booklets in a group setting, approach is key. Begin by saying something like, *This looks interesting. Will you play along with me?* “Play” is a much friendlier word than “test,” and inviting someone along with you is much more enticing than saying you are going to quiz him. Beyond that, the answers to making things fun are scattered throughout this booklet.





One general mood-lifter idea: Get yourself or your group outdoors. All of these activities can be done as easily on a park bench or shaded porch with clipboards as indoors around a table. Few of us get outdoors enough, and the fresh air has multiple physical and emotional benefits. Take advantage of it at every possible opportunity.

Trivia quizzes

If you take a trivia quiz expecting to know the answers, you may say that many of those in the booklets are “hard,” but if you take it expecting to learn something new, then those in the booklets are ideal. To me, it is perfectly obvious that there is no earthly reason why you *should* know the answers; I am hoping you will simply have your curiosity aroused by the new information. Occasionally I will try tapping into your grade school memory with a geography quiz, but more often I will talk about something like the history of beer or underwear, and honestly, why on earth would you expect to know those answers? It’s called a “trivia” quiz for a reason.

If there is no reason to know the information or retain it, you might as well have fun with it. Even if the trivia quiz topic in any given week is serious on the surface – such as the history of bagpipes – you can approach it with a light-hearted touch. Rather than saying something like, *Today we’re going to be talking about Scotland; let’s begin with a quiz on the history of bagpipes. Get your pencils out. Ready?* – Set the expectation that they aren’t going to know the answers, but they can make some reasonable guesses along the way to learning something new. The trivia quizzes almost always involve multiple choice or true/false questions so that participants have a 25% - 50% chance of getting the right answers just from guessing. Remember to show interest and curiosity about the subject. *Hmmm, this isn’t something I know anything about, but let’s give it a go. What do you think?* You can also build confidence in participants by paying attention to certain quiz patterns:

First, I try to make the questions themselves informative. For example, bagpipes are so thoroughly associated today with men in kilts that it is hard to imagine they originated in the Middle East and have long been part of other cultures, including the Roman Empire. I found that fascinating, so I built it into the quiz. You can point out that when I give a lot of seemingly factual information in the question, it’s often true, like this:

Bagpipes were a particular favorite of the Emperor Nero; Roman coinage of his era features a likeness of him playing a bagpipe. Some historians even believe he might have played a bagpipe, and not the fiddle, while Rome burned.

Second, anyone who has tried a few of my trivia quizzes will note that false answers most often have to do with numbers, because while I would have a tough time thinking up a false fact – Who knew Nero played the bagpipes, for goodness sake? – changing numbers is easy, like this:





Bagpipes have long been favored by generals because their shrill, aggressive, warlike sound can be heard at distances up to five miles, which means they are not easily drowned out by the sounds of battle.

That “five” miles should actually be nine miles. Knowing the answer in advance isn’t important, but ruminating on the information once you know it can add a new element to the experience. For example: Nine miles is an amazing distance. Think of where a discussion on that topic could lead: *Are there any other sounds that can be heard so far away? Foghorns? Train whistles? Volcanic rumblings?*

Furthermore, bagpipes themselves are likely to stir strong feelings – people tend to love them or hate them, making for lively discussions. Which leads to the topic of voting. In a group setting, one of the ways I bring energy to discussions is to ask people to vote. *Raise your hand if you love bagpipes.* (Count the votes.) *Raise your hand if you think they make an awful sound.* (Count again.) You can do this with every quiz question. *How many think a. is the right answer? How many think it’s b.? and so on.*

One of the suggestions I make in my book ***Getting to Know the Life Stories of Older Adults*** (See Resources) is to use colorful plastic picnic plates that you can purchase at any party store as the “voting machine.” Give everyone a plate and with each question say, *If you think the answer is true, raise your plate.* (Count votes.) *If you think it’s false, raise your plate.* (Count again.) You can choose plate colors to go with a season (pastels in spring, oranges and gold in fall) or a holiday (green for St. Patrick’s Day). The point is that color and motion create energy in a room, so discussions will be enlivened.

I also sometimes insert who-said-what **quotation quizzes** in this section. Once again the point is not to know the right answer but to use the quote as a starting point for discussion. For example, I don’t really care if you can identify the women who said the following in our quotation quiz celebrating Women’s History Month (although the answers are Gypsy Rose Lee and Shirley MacLaine) but I think a discussion about what they said could be lots of fun.

- I have everything I had twenty years ago, only it’s all a bit lower.
- It is useless to hold a person to anything he says while he’s in love, drunk, or running for office.

Each trivia quiz is usually about 10 – 15 questions, which played as an intimidating test could be completed in about 10 – 15 minutes, but as a means of stirring up discussion, can easily last a fun-filled hour.

Imagination and Creativity (The “Tapping into” section)

The “Tapping into” sections of the booklets ask participants to tap into either their imagination or their memories/life experiences. They’re designed to be an activity that can be done spontaneously with minimal introduction, which makes them ideal for:



- a last minute substitution
- a time-filler such as waiting for lunch or during the bus ride on an outing
- being comfortably led by a volunteer or less-experienced person

At the same time, they introduce legitimate discussion topics, and because they almost always have space for writing down thoughts, some activity leaders use them specifically as creative writing class topics. I also encourage activity leaders who are using them purely for discussion to give participants a few minutes to write down their thoughts, because doing so helps them to gather their ideas and become better focused.

With some frequency we try to introduce the imaginative exercise with **light-hearted examples**, both to set a tone for the discussion and to stir one’s brain cells. For example, we introduced an exercise on:

- **unusual names** with an organist named C. Sharpe Minor
- **proverbs** with samples written by school children, such as “A penny saved is not much”
- **quirky song titles** with samples that included “You Can’t Have Your Kate and Edith, Too.”



Feel free to create your own cow paths, too. With an exercise on thinking of quirky song titles, we suggested that readers reminisce about odd song titles from their youth, such as “Flat Foot Floogie,” or camp songs from their childhood, “Knick-Knack Paddy Whack, Give the Dog a Bone,” or sounds (She-boom, she-boom or Sha-na-na) that we once thought were “cool.” If this then leads to a sing-along, that’s a terrific variation. **Imaginative exercises that lead into musical variations are always worth encouraging.**

Occasionally we suggest an art project here. I am a strong proponent of art as a way to keep brains active, but I don’t do it often, only because art usually starts with a blank page, and that’s not what people tend to look for in booklets. On the other hand, Marge Engelmann in her book, ***Aerobics of the Mind***, (See Resources) suggested a wonderful activity that includes putting just a couple of lines on a piece of paper and letting people finish them in some way. I’ve done this with lots of groups and am always amazed at what they come up with. All of us who are not natural artists tend to be intimidated by a blank page, but give us a couple of lines and we will doodle away.

Occasionally I introduce a topic in this section that I would be delighted to have a group take up and make their own. For instance, I wrote about the concept of a Complaint Choir in the music booklet, which would be fun to incorporate as a special event in your programming. I have also highlighted a group of seniors who started an advice column for teenagers that ran in their local newspaper; yours might even become a blog.



Read and Discuss

In this section of the booklets, we always try to choose topics for discussion that are broadly appealing and ask questions that prompt opinions rather than require specific information.

Reading aloud is something many older adults enjoy, so don't hesitate to give participants a chance to do so with this section. Also don't feel that you have to read the whole article before discussing the questions. Look through them in advance, and if it makes sense to discuss the first question after the first paragraph, do so. Furthermore, don't limit yourself to the questions provided. Sometimes a topic will lead to a wonderful tangent, and at other times people will simply come up with their own topic-related questions.



Note that while I try to cover a broad variety of topics, I try to avoid what seems controversial. I certainly have strong opinions about politics, religion and sex, but since the goal is to help people connect, I have aimed for more neutral ground. However, participants can still practice the principles of courteous debate – attentive listening (as opposed to waiting their turn to talk), respectfully disagreeing with an opinion (not attacking the person), giving everyone who wants to a chance to speak, and so on. Some people will always prefer to just listen, but no one should be made to feel that his or her input would not be valued and respected.

Sometimes I include information on a charitable cause I think is worth highlighting. Again, I try to avoid controversy by concentrating on people who are doing brave work like Greg Mortenson building schools for girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan through his Central Asia Institute (<http://www.gregmortenson.com/>). Ironically, he has been in the news more recently for not paying attention to business details – in other words, he has become controversial. I still consider him an incredibly committed man doing admirable work. My intent is not only to make others aware of good news in the world, but perhaps to inspire others to say, “What can we do to support this work?” No matter what our age, we want to be helpful to others, and if this column inspires a group to conduct a fund-raiser or to tutor children after school, or to knit blankets for babies, I hope you'll encourage it.



Word Games

The Wiser Now booklets feature a broad variety of word games, but I avoid both crossword puzzles and word searches because they can be readily found in so many other places. If you're an activity director who would like to include them in your programming or an individual who simply enjoys them, one good website with reasonably large print word search puzzles for varying levels of ability is <http://www.puzzles.ca/wordsearch.html>.

I printed out one that had hidden the titles of Broadway Musicals within the square, for example. Note that this is a Canadian site, so it uses British English spelling (realise vs. realize, etc.).



As someone who loves puns, I frequently create word games that involve punning or jokes with punch lines that are puns. I've also used word games to introduce spoonerisms, daffynitions, quirky country music titles and other oddities using dozens of word play books for inspiration.

Many of the booklets are theme-based. For example, the money booklet includes a trivia quiz on money, a "Tapping into" column on thoughts about wealth, and a quiz on the word origins of various money terms. If you do take up a theme for the week, I hope you'll find additional ways to carry it out with decorations or snacks. (Cookies decorated with frosting dollar signs?)

Sometimes the word games are relatively difficult. **I always encourage people to partner up to solve the trivia quiz and word game.** Having a partner takes some of the pressure off those who are most concerned about getting answers right, and generally increases the element of fun. This is another place where you can vote on what you think is the right answer.

H D A Y
T R I B E
C A K E

Another making-up-words game that I have used in a few booklets is **The Clock Game** which was produced by ElderGames. It does not seem to be available any longer, unfortunately, but you can make your own version. The premise, as you can see from this example, is to make as many words as possible from a 12-letter phrase arranged in a circle like the numbers on a clock. Each of the 25 phrases in the original game can lead to more than 100 words.

The advantage of putting words in a circle is that you escape the linear thinking of putting the phrase in a line. If I write

B I R T H D A Y C A K E

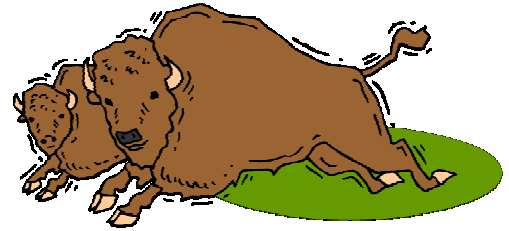
In a line like this, you see the same letters as when they are in a circle, but your thinking is likely to be less creative. For example, you do not see the obvious word "tribe" that shows up when the phrase is in a circle, and "C" in a line is not so easily paired with other combinations (ck, ch, cl, cr, tch) as it is in a circle. (This is also a trick used by developers of word puzzles.)

Among the other examples of 12-letter phrases used in The Clock Game were

- the newspaper
- spring flower
- Italian bread
- raking leaves
- costume party
- Mother Nature
- Christmas Eve



The beauty of this game is that it is easy to make your own variations by simply putting any phrase with a good combination of consonants and vowels in a circle. You can also use more or fewer than 12 letters. If you have a group of three or four people who are word-lovers, you might let them develop the list of words to be made from the phrase, along with some clues. For example, one word that can be made from the letters in “Mother Nature” is “roam,” so the clue might be, “Where the buffalo _____.” Then use their ideas to present the game to a larger group.



Finally, when we’re talking about words and word games, many people enjoy books *about* words, especially ones written in a humorous vein. Although I sometimes draw a few examples from the following books, they contain many more delights than I can possibly cover in the word games. If you are reading this online, you can click on the blue link to learn more about them at Amazon, and order them directly if you are interested.

- *Alphabet Juice* by Roy Blount, Jr. To order (and/or learn more), [click here](#).
- *Crazy English* by Richard Lederer. To order (and/or learn more), [click here](#).
- *Fractured English* by Richard Lederer. To order (and/or learn more), [click here](#).
- *More Joy of Lex* by Gyles Brandreth. To order (and/or learn more), [click here](#).
- *Mother Tongue* by Bill Bryson. To order (and/or learn more), [click here](#).

Potpourri

Each week, this section of *Brain Aerobics Weekly* was a mixture of other ideas, art, resources, anecdotes, and humor that didn’t fit into the other four sections or was additional material on a topic that I ran out of room for in the two pages reserved for those first four categories. Most of this content is now in the brain aerobics booklets as brief filler for:

- A spontaneous discussion or dinner conversations
- Information in your newsletter or on your bulletin board
- Extending one of the other activities on that theme

You might also consider one or more items as a spark for a larger study, such as when I briefly highlight an artist.

Wiser Now Resources

You can access several other free resources through the Wiser Now website and blogs, including these additional booklets:

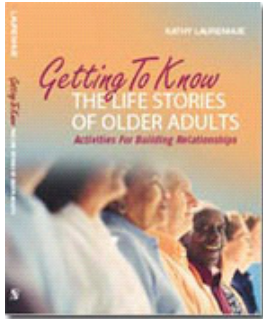
- *Adapting Brain Aerobics Booklets for Someone with Dementia*
- *The Philosophy Behind Wiser Now’s Mind Play and Brain Aerobics Materials*
- *A Few of My Favorite Resources for Keeping Our Brains Active*

Do you want more mind-stimulating material?

Check out the ever-growing list of brain aerobics/mind play booklets downloadable booklets on the primary website www.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 in your life 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.

