Life Lessons: Brain health

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COOPERSBURG, Pa. - Most of us think about keeping our bodies healthy but what about our brains?

New research says people over 50 are more worried about their ability to stay mentally sharp than they are about other things like retirement savings and health care expenses.

So now there’s a national campaign taking place in your local Area Agency on Aging to help you find information about how to keep your mind in tip top shape.

The program was established and funded by the Administration for Community Living (ACL) and administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging to help educate the public about the risks to brain health for older adults and simple strategies to help mitigate those risks.

A brochure entitled “Brain Health: You Can Make a Difference” is the centerpiece of the campaign, containing recommendations and resources to help older adults take charge of their brain health as they age.

Locally, this resource is being used in local senior centers like the Coopersburg Senior Center where Rose Sheptock of Center Valley goes to exercise class twice a week. At 82, Rose says she wants to keep her mind sharp and she thinks exercise helps not just her body but her mind too.

"It's just something you have to do to keep your mind active. I am an active person and I don't want to stop being active,” says Rose.

Experts say exercise is one of the cornerstones of healthy aging. Judith Stanczak, RN MSN, Deputy Administrator III Lehigh County Office of Aging and Adult Services, says older adults need to challenge themselves physically and mentally. "We never stop learning and if we do keep our minds active, we eat a healthy diet, we exercise, these are all things that can promote our brain health.” says Stanczak.

But this isn't news to folks who work with older adults. Terri Unger-Gisolfi is a certified exercise instructor who has worked with the older population for 25 years. She says exercise programs work to stimulate the brain. "

So that when you're doing things that are involving rhythm, strategy and patterning, that's going to make your brain come alive a little bit . They're actually learning activities and then you add the music component, it's like learning a new dance.”

What else can you do to keep your brain healthy?
* Eat right
* Use alcohol moderately
* Manage your medical conditions
* Try mentally stimulating games
* Volunteer
* Socialize
* Get moving

"It's really about staying active, reading, anything that stimulates your mind that you enjoy and want to do on a daily basis." says Stanczak.

Terri Unger-Gisolfi says you don't have to do an organized exercise program if you don't want to. "It's not that you need to do this structured one hour a day; you can do 10 minutes when you wake up, 10 minutes in the afternoon."

Rose says Unger-Gisolfi reminds the seniors in her exercise class of one more thing: "She keeps us moving and she always says 'move it or loose it'" Rose adds.

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