

Instructor Bob Kodzis leads a Brain Fitness Club participant in an improvisation game designed to help keep minds agile and to overcome fear of failure that many Alzheimer's patients experience.



FIT BRAINS

One Way to Confront the Monster Under the Bed.

BY MARC MIDDLETON

Multiple studies reveal that adults now fear dementia more than cancer or cardiac disease. Alzheimer's has become the monster under the bed for older adults — and the only way to deal with the fear of the monster is to get down on your hands and knees and look under the bed.

That's how we have to deal with Alzheimer's. We can't pull the covers over our heads and hope it doesn't find us. We have to confront it by learning as much as we can about it.

We have to improve our lifestyles to reduce or delay our chances of getting it. We have to help fund critical research and support organizations that serve those with dementia. And we have to talk about it.

When we heard about the Brain Fitness Club in Winter Park, Florida, we were anxious for a peek inside, for an opportunity to speak with its organizers and perhaps even some of its members.

We assured the club that we would respect the privacy of those who didn't want to be identified or interviewed. Surpris-

ingly, most members were anxious to share their stories in hopes of helping others.

"I used to think that I was alone," says member Lucy McBean. "And I did more crying than anything else, because I didn't know that other people we're going through the same thing. Now I don't feel bad if I don't understand something or I don't remember something. I just say, 'I don't remember.'"

"All of the Brain Fitness Club members have a memory impairment of some sort," says Director Peggy Bargmann, a registered nurse specializing in gerontology who has been an innovator in the field of brain health for decades. "They're all in the very early stages, so they all know they have memory impairment and they want to be here."

When we visited, instructor Bob Kodzis was leading members in an improvisation game designed to keep their minds agile, and to help them overcome their nearly constant fear of failure.

"People with memory challenges don't eas-

Peggy Bargmann, director of the Brain Fitness Club, is a registered nurse specializing in gerontology who has been an innovator in brain health for decades.



ily forgive themselves for forgetting, and that decreases their quality of life,” Kodzis says. “Improvisation teaches them that it’s OK to make mistakes, and it’s OK to forget.”

The Brain Fitness Club offers three 14-week semesters every year. Sessions take place twice weekly for four hours each day, and cover everything from nutrition and exercise to the very latest therapies and facilitation techniques.

In addition, graduate clinicians from the University of Central Florida’s Communication Disorders Clinic, supervised by a professor, conduct thorough assessments of each member’s strengths. Based on that evaluation, an individualized plan of care is developed.

“We’re a capabilities-based program, so we don’t look at disability at all,” says Bargmann. “We only look at what our members can do, not what they can’t. Instead of a rehab program that takes what’s broken and tries to fix it, we focus on what’s working well

and develop ways to keep doing well at it.”

The International Council on Activity Aging has named the Brain Fitness Club one of North America’s most innovative active-aging programs — and it’s easy to see why.

“This is a really good place to come and be yourself,” says member Nancy Dulniak. “We’ve learned not to be afraid of saying the wrong thing or forgetting something, because we all have that problem. It’s a safe place.”

Annette Kelly, a nationally known Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner, college professor and senior advocate, is one of the many highly skilled advisors to the program. “The goal is to provide proven, success based, brain-friendly activities and teach lifestyle adaptations in a nurturing social environment,” she says.

Kodzis volunteers his time and talent because he loves spending time with his elders — and he’s a big fan of the women who run

it. “I call them the Justice League,” he says. “They’re focused on helping people as they age; to age in place, to age healthily and to get the most out of life. I love these ladies, and I love what they do.”

The Brain Fitness Club is not only improving lives of members and their families, it’s also sending a message that a patient asked Bargmann to deliver years ago:

“He said, ‘When people hear that I have Alzheimer’s disease, they expect me to be in a nursing home drooling, and I’m not. I’m living. I want people to know that you can live with Alzheimer’s disease. Get out there and stop the stigma that we’re living with.’ That’s been my mission ever since.” ■



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Visit GrowingBolderMagazine.com to watch our feature story on the Brain Fitness Club and to find out how you can get in contact with its organizers for more information.