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# Senior expo aims to teach old brains new tricks

By Terry Oparka

August 26, 2015

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Jeri Lynn Plec, of Sterling Heights, center, plays a game designed to shake up her brain at the Senior Living and Learning Expo at the Troy Community Center Aug. 19. (Photo by Erin Sanchez)

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Did you know that we have, on average, 70,000 thoughts each day?

Or that your brain is an oxygen hog, taking 20 percent of each breath you take?

Participants in the Senior Living and Learning Expo, titled Brainstorm: A Workout for the Mind, learned these facts and several tricks to shake up their brains. The event was sponsored by the Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan and was held at the Troy Community Center Aug. 19.

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Donna MacDonald, director of outreach at the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology, and Cheryl Deep, director of media relations and communication at the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology, conducted the workshop.

“This (program) came about because we thought, we need to do something a little different ... for seniors and others and make it a learning experience that was fun,” said Herschell Masten, director of senior services for Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan.

Jason Shanks, CEO of Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan, said the group served over 15,000 clients last year.

“We want to make it real and tangible,” he said. “We gain through service.”

“This program is about shaking out of patterns and routines. That’s why we’re here: to shake you up,” Deep said.

To shake up your brain, take different routes when traveling, close your eyes when you are eating and try using your nondominant hand, said MacDonald. She instructed people in the 100-plus crowd to use their nondominant hand to make a paper airplane and to do mirror writing, or writing backward, which looks correct when held up to a mirror.

“There are 100 billion neurons — as many as stars in the galaxy — in the brain, with 100 trillion connections,” she said. “When we age, they start misfiring. The brain shrinks as we age, and that starts at age 20. It takes longer to process information and longer to recall information.”

She added that scientists now know that new brain neurons and connections grow, even in the hippocampus, where dementia strikes, until we die.

“Stimulate your brain with new activities to build new connections,” MacDonald said. “And avoid stress, get good sleep, exercise and stop smoking — 75 percent of our memories are stored while we sleep.”

“Stress and surprise can throw you off,” said Deep.

She noted that people cannot multitask as well as they age.

She talked about drugs that, according to the American Geriatrics Society and Dr. Richard Mohs of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, may make memory worse:

- acid-reflux drugs
- anti-anxiety medications, such as Valium, Librium, Halcion and Xanax
- antihistamines
- antipsychotic drugs
- beta blockers
- blood pressure medicine
- chemotherapy drugs
- cholesterol-lowering drugs
- heart medications
- drugs for incontinence
- over the counter and prescription painkillers, including Darvon, codeine, Demerol, Naproxen, Aleve, Vicodin and Tylenol PM
- Parkinson’s drugs
- sleeping pills
- tranquilizers

They also discussed the importance of staying hydrated and drinking at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water per day.

They also talked about various community programs available for older adults, such as adult day-health services, senior companion programs and foster grandparents programs.

Chris Cosnowski, a faith community nurse for Orchard Lake Community Church, Presbyterian, said she planned to take what she learned at the program back to the members of the church.

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“And I’m a senior,” she said.

Clinton Township resident Theresa Bursey, 68, said she also planned to take the information back to the Clinton Township Senior Center, where she volunteers. “I’m a regular,” she said. “I like to give and I love what I do.”

For information about Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan, Older Adult Services, visit [www.csem.org](http://www.csem.org) or call (248) 559-1147. For information about the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology, visit [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu) or call (313) 664-2600.

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