

BOOMERS, ELDERS & MORE

A Monthly Elder Care Newsletter of the
Vanderbilt Child & Family Center



5 WAYS TO KEEP YOUR BRAIN HEALTHY DURING THE PANDEMIC

by Hallie Levine

Is your brain feeling ... foggy? You're not just imagining it. "Keeping busy with regular activities and spending time with others are both key to brain health and lowering your risk of dementia – and they're also things most of us are lacking right now," says psychiatrist Gary Small, director of the UCLA Longevity Center. The good news is there is plenty you can do during this pandemic to keep your brain neurons firing.

Here are five things to try.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- **Keeping Your Home Healthy**
- **Overcoming Self Neglect**
- **Finding Creative Inspiration During Quarantine**
- **VCFC Caregiver Support Group**

Stay active

Exercise won't just keep your heart healthy and your weight down as you face lots of time inside – it helps your brain stay in shape, too. “We know that regular aerobic exercise boosts blood flow to your brain, and also increases the size of your hippocampus, the part of your brain that's involved in verbal memory and learning,” explains geriatrician Zaldy Tan, medical director of the UCLA Alzheimer's and Dementia Care Program. His own study, among others, helped uncover the link: “When we performed MRI scans of over 2,000 people over age 60, we found that the more active they were, the bigger their hippocampus,” he says. “Even better, the protective effects were highest in those over age 75, which suggests that it's never too late to start.”

You don't need much exercise to see benefits.

Walking or cycling just three times a week appears to improve thinking skills after six months in formerly sedentary people over age 55, according to a recent study published in the medical journal *Neurology*. A heart-healthy diet adds even more benefits: People who followed the DASH (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) diet, an eating plan rich in fruits, veggies, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy, fared even better.

Besides getting in a regular walk (or two) during the day, limit sitting as much as possible to preserve your brain health. Adults ages 45 to 75 who sit for anywhere from three to seven hours each day have a substantial thinning of their medial temporal lobe, which is where the brain forms new memories, according to a 2018 study. “This is one of the types of changes that precede dementia,” says study coauthor Small.

And don't forget resistance training, if you can squeeze it in, Small adds. A 2019 study found that lab rats who “weight trained” (meaning they were trained to climb a 3-foot-high ladder with dumbbells attached) three times a week performed much better on memory tests after five weeks than a control group. “It seems to help reduce some of the brain inflammation associated with dementia,” Small says.

Target stress

Stress itself is toxic to brain cells. “It kills them off and shrinks both the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, both areas of the brain responsible for memory and learning,” says psychiatrist Majid Fotuhi, an affiliate staff member at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. A review of studies published in April 2018, which followed almost 30,000 people for at least 10 years, found that people who reported “clinically significant anxiety” were more likely to develop dementia later in life.

Practicing mindfulness techniques such as meditation or yoga may help fend off anxiety's toll on the brain. One UCLA study found that people over age 55 who enrolled in a 12-week program consisting of an hour of a type of meditative yoga once a week as well as 20 minutes of at-home meditation had significant improvements in both verbal memory (the ability to remember word lists) and visual-spatial memory (the ability to find and remember locations). Fotuhi says meditation and yoga “appear to enhance production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, a protein that stimulates connections between your brain neurons.”

Even if Downward-Facing Dog isn't your thing, you can reap similar benefits by just adding deep breathing exercises into your daily routine five to 10 minutes a day, Fotuhi says.

Limit anxiety and sleep medications

It may be tempting to pop a Xanax or ask your physician for a prescription of sleep meds during these stressful times. But try to avoid doing so if you can, says Small. People who take a benzodiazepine – drugs such as diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan) or alprazolam (Xanax) – regularly are about 50 percent more likely to develop Alzheimer's, according to a review published in the Journal of Clinical Neurology last year.

Another recent study published in the Journal of the American Geriatric Society found a link between long-term use of the sleeping pill zolpidem (Ambien) and Alzheimer's. The same holds true for over-the-counter sleep aids such as diphenhydramine or doxylamine (Unisom).

These medications, found in the “PM” versions of Tylenol, Aleve and Advil as well as allergy meds such as Zyrtec and Benadryl, are anticholinergics, a type of drug that has been linked to lower cognitive ability and possibly even dementia in elderly adults, according to a study published in JAMA Neurology.

Sleep itself is important for brain health, because it gives your body a chance to clean out all the waste, such as beta-amyloid plaques that raise risk of developing dementia, Small says. But rather than relying on meds, you're better off practicing good sleep habits such as cutting out all caffeine after lunch, staying away from electronic devices for a couple of hours before bed, and maintaining regular sleep and wake times every day.

Stay connected as much as possible

Social isolation is a major risk factor for dementia, says Small. If you normally enjoy activities such as a book club or game night, try to arrange them virtually. “My wife and I play the card game hearts online with our friends a couple times a week,” Small says. Or use the Zoom conferencing platform to create a virtual party where you can hang out with close family and friends. One landmark University of Michigan study found that just 10 minutes of talking to another person can help boost memory and cognitive performance.

You can also try connecting a little more deeply on social media; if you normally just click “Like” on friends’ Facebook posts, for example, Fotuhi suggests actually commenting on them. “When you write something, chances are they will reply, and it's a way to have a virtual conversation with them,” he says.

If possible, volunteer – whether it's making cloth masks for a homeless shelter, or making weekly phone calls for your house of worship to check in on the homebound. Seniors who do so have lower rates of dementia, according to a 2017 study. “It kills two birds with one stone, because it forces you to engage with others while doing something at the same time that works your brain,” Tan says.



Use the internet strategically

While it can be a great tool in helping you stay connected, “our natural tendency is to go online and surf incessantly, which doesn't accomplish anything except to fill up idle time,” Tan says. Instead, he recommends making a list of things you've always been curious about — learning Japanese, playing guitar, visiting New Zealand — and focusing your browsing on that. Smithsonian magazine, for example, allows you to explore Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, participate in a virtual wine tasting and venture through various museums without ever leaving your house. Limit your time on news websites, Tan adds, which can be anxiety-producing.

If you feel like you don't even have the bandwidth for new online experiences, no worries. Even seemingly little things like reading the paper every day or playing Monopoly with your partner or kids instead of watching TV can reap real benefits. A Chinese study of more than 15,000 people over age 65 published in *JAMA Psychiatry* in 2018 found that those who regularly participated in intellectual activities such as reading books or newspapers, or playing board games, card games or mah-jongg, had significantly lower risk of dementia. “Do anything you can do that's not passive, but forces you to think critically and interact with others,” Tan says.

KEEPING YOUR HOME HEALTHY BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CAREGIVER VISITS

Tips from experts on disinfecting surfaces, distancing, deliveries and more

by Aaron Kassraie, AARP 2020



For those living at home who require the assistance of home health aides and other caregivers, avoiding others to avoid the coronavirus isn't necessarily an option. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now recommends face masks be worn when social distancing is difficult to maintain. That's often the case in caregiving situations, when it's difficult to stay 6 feet apart.

We asked health and hygiene experts for other tips on staying healthy before, during and after in-home visits by aides and other caregivers. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

The Experts:

- **K.C. Rondello**, a disaster epidemiologist and clinical associate professor at Adelphi University's College of Nursing and Public Health
- **Carl Fichtenbaum**, an internist specializing in infectious diseases and a professor of clinical medicine at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine
- **Brandon Brown**, an associate professor and researcher specializing in infectious diseases at the University of California Riverside
- **Brian Sansoni**, senior vice president of communications at the American Cleaning Institute

Before the caregiver visit

Rondello: All presume that the home is a safe place to be, that it is protective. An individual's home is meant to be a sanctuary from the outside world, and in the midst of a pandemic, that refuge must be biologically secure as well. For that reason, we need to do everything in our power to preserve the safety of the home.

That starts by limiting both the number of people going in and out and the number of times they do it. However, there are some essential services that must be done in the home, such as caregiving.

"An individual's home is meant to be a sanctuary from the outside world, and in the midst of a pandemic, that refuge must be biologically secure as well."

Fichtenbaum: Older adults should first check with caretakers/aides through their home care company if they have a policy of screening staff for COVID-19 symptoms or exposure each day prior to a visit. If you hire someone directly, call them the day before and ask about symptoms like fever, cough, sneezing or runny nose. Ask if they have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 in the past two weeks. If yes to either, it's probably best to avoid the visit. Whenever the caretaker arrives, make sure they wash their hands thoroughly for 30 seconds with soap and water before any care is completed. Remind them not to touch their face, mouth, nose or eyes while in the home.

"Whenever the caretaker arrives, make sure they wash their hands thoroughly for 30 seconds with soap and water before any care is completed."

During the caregiver visit

Rondello: The caregiver should wear gloves around the patient, and both the patient and caregiver should cover any coughs or sneezes (followed by hand rewashing). For those responsibilities that don't require close proximity, like doing laundry or preparing meals, the rules of social distancing apply. For instance, the caregiver and patient should maintain a 6-foot distance from each other.

Brown: The caretaker should also be careful to touch as few surfaces as possible. Physical distancing and not touching surfaces may not be possible in situations where dressing, cleaning or assisting older adults with exercise are among the activities.

In that case, PPE [personal protective equipment, such as gloves and masks] should be used. Additionally, the caretaker should ask the older adult if they feel any symptoms of the virus and provide a one-page laminated sheet for them which lists the symptoms, a number to call and other important information. If they have a thermometer, that is a good tool to measure potential fever. Also, ask if they have enough soap, toilet paper – and if they have mobility issues, hand sanitizer.

"The caretaker should ask the older adult if they feel any symptoms of the virus and provide a one-page laminated sheet for them which lists the symptoms, a number to call and other important information."

Sansoni: If the caretaker is caring for someone diagnosed with or showing signs of Alzheimer's or another form of dementia, the caretaker should do all of the cleaning and store all cleaning products, including liquid laundry packets, up, out of sight and out of reach in a locked closet or cabinet when not in use.

To be extra cautious, if the caretaker is retrieving packages or mail, that person may want to open the package and discard the packaging outside the home and wash his or her hands immediately after handling the package.

After the caregiver visit

Sansoni: Older adults may want to clean and disinfect surfaces that the visitor touched, which are also frequently touched by the patient. This includes things like tables, hard-backed chairs, doorknobs, light switches, remote controls and handles – there are many of them, on the refrigerator, cabinets, toilet and sink. Always follow label instructions for any cleaning product you use.

"Older adults may want to clean and disinfect surfaces that the visitor touched, which are also frequently touched by the patient."

Rondello: Antimicrobial wipes are a good choice if they are available, or another household disinfectant will do (make sure to follow the instructions on the label). You can also use household bleach in a solution of one-third cup per gallon of water. Remember to allow the solution to remain in place for one minute before wiping and also ensure that the room is well ventilated and you wear gloves.

When it comes to clothing or linens being brought in from the outside, do not shake out the dirty laundry. Wash the clothes using the warmest appropriate water setting, and be sure to dry the clothes completely.

It is not necessary to practice extreme measures such as leaving groceries out on the porch for three days before being brought inside. But wiping down prescription bottles, food containers and other packaging is reasonable. Once you have done so and sanitized the packaging, wash your own hands before taking the medicine, preparing the food or eating.

5 STEPS TO DISINFECTING SURFACES

1. Pre-clean surfaces with soap and water prior to disinfecting to remove excess dirt or grime.
2. Use the disinfecting spray or wipe as directed.
3. After disinfecting, let the surface air dry, making sure it stays wet for as long as recommended on the product label. This is critical in ensuring that the proper germ or virus kill takes place as intended.
4. If disinfecting food contact surfaces or toys, rinse with water after they air dry.
5. If using a disinfectant wipe, throw out after using. Do not flush any non-flushable products.

Source: American Cleaning Institute

HOW TO OVERCOME CAREGIVER SELF-NEGLECT

Keeping an eye on your own needs can help you better manage other responsibilities

by Barry Jacobs



Here are few ideas for caregivers to find a better balance between the commitment to caring for loved ones and the necessity of caring for themselves.

Your During 53-year-old Fern’s quarterly medical visit, she noticed the look of frustration on her physician’s face, as if he were thinking, “Why won’t she take care of her diabetes?” Once again, her blood sugars were running very high. Fern didn’t disagree with him. She wanted to be in better health and nodded when he said, “If you get too sick, then you won’t be able to care for your mother.”

But when it came to the choices she made each day, caregiving clearly took priority over managing her diabetes. Whenever her mother had trouble sleeping, Fern would stay up with her to watch TV. Then the two of them would sleep late the next morning and Fern would miss her insulin dose. Or her mother would wet the bed, and Fern would scramble to change her clothes and wash the sheets. She would then forget to eat breakfast and take her medications. Or Fern would remember to give her mother — who also was diabetic — an insulin shot (and even remember to give the dog his insulin) but would be so busy managing other responsibilities that she lost track of her own medical needs.text

Her devotion to caregiving was admirable, but the extent of her caregiver self-neglect was alarming. Many caregivers find themselves in the same position – pivoting from one pressing task to the next without pausing to consider their own well-being. It is a case of the tyranny of the urgent overwhelming any forethought and prudence. It is often a recipe for disaster.

Fern's disaster eventually came with a series of hospitalizations for diabetic ketoacidosis both shortly before and after her mother's death. She then felt guilty that she hadn't been at her mother's side every moment before her death. Fern also regretted that her own health was now compromised.

It is not enough to tell family caregivers, as flight attendants tell airline passengers, "Put on your oxygen mask first." Too many caregivers fail to practice self-care at all, let alone tend to their own needs before those of their care receivers. How can they find a better balance between the commitment to caring for loved ones and the necessity of caring for themselves? Here are some ideas:

Stop living only in the moment.

The spiritual teacher Ram Dass exhorts "Be here now" and Alcoholics Anonymous advises living "one day at a time." These are wonderful admonitions, but they don't work well when dealing with a string of big and small caregiving emergencies that cumulatively take their toll. For every pivot toward crisis, you need to take into account both what needs to be done and what consequences you may experience. Ask yourself, "What will this cost me, and can I sustain myself through the course of caregiving if I continually pay that cost over time?" With a progressive health condition such as diabetes, the answer is likely no.

Feel guilty — but for not helping yourself.

I've heard too many caregivers explain that taking the time to tend to their own health made them feel guilty when their loved ones were in pain or distress. But if their loved ones always had some degree of discomfort, those caregivers then felt compelled to forever neglect themselves.

"As much as you may want to give comfort, you do your loved one a disservice by rendering yourself unwell and thereby unable to fulfill your caregiving duties."



Link caregiving and self-care tasks.

Rather than regarding caregiving and self-care as an either-or proposition, link them logistically. Use your daily schedule for caring for your loved one as a cue for prompting you to care for yourself. For example, you can dole out and take your pills at the same time that you dole out and give pills to the care receiver. You can give her an insulin shot and then immediately take your own. You can schedule back-to-back medical appointments for you and your loved one with the same primary care provider so that you both receive the care you need.

Work toward family wellness.

You would never willingly choose to help one family member if it meant that another family member would unnecessarily suffer. Don't put yourself in the position of the neglected sufferer. Caregiving is ultimately about caring for every family member – including determined but still-vulnerable caregivers.

FIND CREATIVE INSPIRATION ONLINE DURING QUARANTINE

From dancing to collage making, here are 7 virtual art experiences to try

by Julie Pfitzinger



Maybe you are sorely missing your weekly watercolor class. Maybe the shelter-in-place mandate brought on by the coronavirus pandemic has given you unexpected time or is compelling you to take this opportunity to fold some creativity into your new routine.

Artist Lois Cremmins, 66, recently moved from New York City to Boston, and is taking daily walks to Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum. It's there that she's finding inspiration for the painting and collage works she's doing with trees as her subjects, updated regularly on her Instagram page, **@loiscremmins**.

"While I am in the act of making art, I am in another world, totally consumed," Cremmins says. "Interestingly, once I am finished and bring my brushes to the sink to wash, I feel a rush of anxiety as if to say 'I don't want to be back to reality.'"

Many of us are longing for a little inspiration, and, more than likely, a brief break from reality. As so much of our world has transitioned online, so have art classes, demonstrations and virtual art experiences.

We reached out to several teaching artists and others to see what they are doing to offer inspiration now. We received many responses and have gathered seven ideas for you here.

Consider this your invitation to draw, move, write, learn and create ... at a time when we need that invitation more than ever. (Platforms and time zones included, if applicable.)

1. Be Creative and Show Care at the Same Time

Founded by Anne Basting, a Next Avenue Influencer in Aging, TimeSlips is offering a free weekly email for caregivers who are looking for simple ways to help older adults engage in creative activities.

There's also a Creativity Center page, with a variety of conversational prompts including a set of what are called "Beautiful Questions." These questions could be used in caregiving settings, but also to spark conversation among family members living together or on Zoom or other video chat calls with family and friends. Some examples: What is your anchor? What do you treasure in your house – and why? What are the sounds of childhood?

TimeSlips has also organized an opportunity for volunteers to share a moment of creativity with residents of nursing homes and senior living facilities through a program called A Little Creative Care.

Take a postcard, and on the back, make a small drawing, write a short poem or ask a Beautiful Question of your own. On the TimeSlips site, you'll find a growing list of addresses from facilities in the United States and abroad (including Italy and New Zealand). From there, you can send one or more postcards to one of the facilities and brighten someone's day.

2. Have Fun Making a Collage

Minneapolis artist Wendy Kieffer Shragg created an online collage project where the only tools needed are magazines, paper, a scissors and a glue stick. The goal, Shragg says, is "to reconnect with that creative side of yourself."

Shragg believes there is freedom in creativity, as well as the chance to "have fun and explore."

In this video, you can follow along with Shragg's process step-by-step. Once you've completed your project, Shragg encourages you to take a photo and share your art on social media with family and friends, or perhaps mail it to someone special.

3. Teaching Tai Chi on YouTube

Acknowledging the need to move and be physically active, and also knowing that many people are looking for ways to relieve stress, Cheryl Vassiliadis, a teaching artist from Hoschton, Ga., has made a YouTube video featuring simple tai chi moves.

“Even as this pandemic started spreading across the world, I was trying to be proactive in keeping in touch with my students,” says Vassiliadis. She says that once she started staying home, she immediately set up a small space in her house to make the videos.

Vassiliadis also teaches dance, and has been offering online courses to her enrolled students. While she admits it’s been a learning curve to bring her work online, Vassiliadis is extremely grateful for the teaching opportunities available through technology. “It can be intimidating at first, but the rewards are very satisfying,” she says.

4. The Nancy Carlson Show: Drawing and More

Children’s book author and illustrator Nancy Carlson, who also lives in the Twin Cities, appears from behind her handcrafted “The Nancy Carlson Show” sign every day at 11 a.m. CT for 15 minutes of storytime, drawing and inspiration. These sweet and upbeat sessions would be a perfect program to watch with a grandchild from a distance. And if you’ve ever wanted to explore the art of writing children’s books, Carlson offers a mini-tutorial.

During a recent episode (all are archived) Carlson started by reading one of her books, *Arnie and the Stolen Markers*; offered an explanation on how to storyboard an eight-page picture book (“By the third square, your problem starts,” she says) and followed that up by drawing an aardvark. There’s an additional suggested craft, a reading pillow, which can be made with fabric paint.

5. Kairos Alive! Daily Swing — Dance Away!

Kairos Alive! is a creative aging program based in the Twin Cities and offering music, theater and dance to older adults through its Dancing Heart Live! art-participation programs.

Known for their work in senior residences, at public events and other locations, Maria Genné and her team aren't exactly new to the virtual class idea: for more than two years, they've been offering live-streaming classes to older adults in northern Minnesota.

But now, during the pandemic, Genné and her daughter Parker are hosting "Daily Swing" on Facebook, from 3-3:10 p.m. CT, every weekday (and archived). Broadcasting not from their usual conference studio, but from Genné's living room, the duo want to encourage people to take a break in the afternoon, get up and move!

6. Create a Visual Journal in an Online Workshop

The Hannan Center, which serves adults 60+ in Detroit and the surrounding areas, is offering a free online workshop called "Visual Journal: Image and Word – An Approach to Self-Expression" taught by Nancy Wolfe, an adjunct professor at Wayne State University. The workshop will launch the week of April 20; registration is available by contacting Pat Baldwin, the director of Beyond U.

According to the course description, "Creating a journal with images and words is a place to honor our own experiences through exercises that expand the creative process and your imagination. It is about different ways to express ourselves and our environment."

One of the workshop goals is for students to "know that imagination and creativity are their own to use."

Exercises and projects include:

- While you wait, a free-form b/w value (shading drawing with pencil)
- Blind contour drawing (drawing without looking at your paper)
- Take a walk outdoors: hear the sounds and.....
- "Fingers, Hands" and Haiku (black & white or color)
- Memory project with image and words to share

7. Writing in Your Own Voice

As part of a series of features on COVID-19 produced by Bridge the Gap, a podcast on issues relative to senior care and housing, Angela Burton, founder and chief writing motivator at Feet to the Fire Writers' Workshops, based in Louisville, Ky., participates in this 15-minute conversation with hosts Lucas McCurdy and Josh Crisp. She talks about how writing "can help us find a voice within" at a time when that's needed now more than ever.

Burton also offers writing prompts, such as the following: "Write a letter to your children or grandchildren. Tell them what it's like to be where you are right now. And then reflect on your memories and experiences in your life, and offer advice on something you have learned. It's valuable for them, and it gives you the chance to use your voice to share your own stories."

Associated Links

TimeSlips

<https://timeslips.org/>

Wendy Kieffer Shragg

<https://youtu.be/l6ZebYbSGG8>

Online Tai Chi

<https://youtu.be/ovla9RXka4Y>

Nancy Carlson Drawing and More

<https://www.facebook.com/NancyCarlson.Author.Illustrator/videos/10158293739108189/>

Kairos Alive- Daily Swing!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldlidL3y9zc&feature=youtu.be>

Visual Journal Online Workshop

<https://hannan.org/classes-and-workshops/>

Bridge the Gap Podcast

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guKjGgz4LhE>



VANDERBILT CHILD & FAMILY CENTER

CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUP

There are **TWO** opportunities to join
us for our virtual support group.

TUESDAY, MAY 12, 2020

12:00-1:00 PM

&

TUESDAY, MAY 26, 2020

12:00-1:00 PM

PLEASE EMAIL:

TOYA.Y.COBB@VANDERBILT.EDU

to receive ZOOM meeting details