

HEALTHWORD  
Putting Health Promotion Back in Motion

October 2006

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HEALTHWORD is a monthly e-mail newsletter produced by the American Society on Aging's (ASA's) Live Well, Live Long project. Live Well, Live Long provides education and resources to professionals in the field of aging to help them improve health promotion and disease prevention efforts aimed at older adults. Current and past issues of this newsletter are available on the Live Well, Live Long website at <http://www.asaging.org/cdc/HealthWord.cfm>.

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FEATURE:

BRAIN HEALTH POLL POINTS THE WAY TOWARD A NEW MENTAL WELLNESS ACTION PLAN

The findings of the ASA-MetLife Foundation Poll created a buzz at the ASA Autumn Series Networking Meeting in San Francisco. Through a grant from MetLife Foundation, ASA had commissioned Harris Interactive to poll people ages 42 and older about what brain health concerns they had as they aged and what they believed were active ways to maintain or improve brain health. The poll found some interesting results:

\* Brain health was not one of the major health concerns that people thought they should know about. While more than half of those interviewed rated heart health as very important, only 7 percent thought the same of brain health.

\* Optimistically, nearly nine out of ten respondents thought it was possible to improve brain fitness. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority said that thinking abilities should be checked as routinely as physical abilities are.

\* Most people recognize that many activities are very useful for improving mental fitness. At least 60 percent said that people should avoid tobacco, eat fresh fruits and vegetables, do puzzles, reduce stress, limit alcoholic drinks, spend time with family and friends, and see the doctor regularly.

\* Eighty-four percent report that they spend time, usually daily, in activities that are good for brain health.

Where do we go from here?

The first step is to open public discussion about brain health. The challenge is to make sure that American consumers have easy access to the good news about the latest discoveries in brain fitness as well as reasonable opportunities to use the information on their own or in facilitated programs.

Authorities in brain research and senior services had a number of observations about future steps that we, as a nation, might take:

Paul Nussbaum, clinical neuropsychologist, believes that brain disease is a major national health issue. “We should make a firm commitment to brain health,” he asserts. “It means investing resources and human capital in education, communication, and behavior change about mental fitness.”

Henry Mahncke, vice president of research and outcomes at Posit Science Corporation, believes that the scientific community has an obligation to develop scientifically based, clinically validated ways to help all individuals maintain brain fitness through life. “Medicare and private health insurers will need to evaluate changes in reimbursement policies if studies conclusively demonstrate real benefits to older individuals and reduced costs to healthcare systems,” he argues.

Kirsten Tierney, from Kisco Senior Living in Carlsbad, Calif., believes that mental fitness activities belong in every type of senior housing. “On-site resources and programs should match the range of settings and populations, which may extend from complete independence to maximum support with activities of daily living,” she writes.

Jim Frasier, director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., sees lifelong learning programs as ideal venues for brain fitness activities. “Cognitive fitness is built into the very nature of courses for older learners,” he writes. “The latest discoveries in brain science should inform how lifelong learning programs are structured in order to maximize benefits to the brain. Established programs can enrich opportunities by adding formal components that translate current research into practical applications and teach memory training techniques.”

The full report on the ASA-MetLife Foundation poll, titled “Attitudes and Awareness of Brain Health,” includes a summary of the results, expert commentaries, a description of the methodology, final top-line data, and resources for further reading. You can

download it free, as a PDF file, from the ASA website at  
<http://www.asaging.org/asav2/mindalert/brainhealthpoll.cfm>.

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TOOLS YOU CAN USE:  
DEPRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

Because October is “Depression and Mental Health Month,” we are featuring three programs from the Live Well, Live Long project’s “Steps for Mental Wellness” module. These programs address positive ways for older adults to engage in the practice of mental wellness. They also open the door for discussion of depression or anxieties. Talk scripts are provided, but we encourage you to use your own words, include supplemental material, and tailor the talks to your community's culture and traditions.

--> Humor and Health

[http://www.asaging.org/cdc/module5/phase4/phase4\\_2.cfm](http://www.asaging.org/cdc/module5/phase4/phase4_2.cfm)

Within an environment of humor and lightness, older adults may feel more comfortable exploring their own experiences with depression and anxiety. Humor ripens the learning moment for teaching appropriate ways to address concerns about depression and anxiety.

--> Mind-Body Connection

[http://www.asaging.org/cdc/module5/phase4/phase4\\_4.cfm](http://www.asaging.org/cdc/module5/phase4/phase4_4.cfm)

There is considerable research documenting the link between the mind and the body. The body's response to stress is natural and protective, but if it gets overstimulated it can weaken the immune system and cause physical health problems. This program invites presenters to lead a discussion designed to change the impact of physical immune responses by using mental activities.

--> Good Grief: Personal Discussions of Losses and Healthy Ways of Coping

[http://www.asaging.org/cdc/module5/phase4/phase4\\_5.cfm](http://www.asaging.org/cdc/module5/phase4/phase4_5.cfm)

Often, grieving the loss of a job, the ability to drive a car, and, of course, loss of a loved one can result in responses that seriously affect an older person's ability to function in daily activities. The danger of grief is intense depression and suicide. The help of professionals in identifying grief, describing our responses to it, and finding healthy expressions of loss can lead to a new definition of mental well-being for the bereaved.

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Event: 59th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America

Dates: Nov. 16-20, 2006

Location: Dallas

The theme of this year’s meeting is “Education and the Gerontological Imagination.”

Sessions of interest:

- \* “Promoting Healthy Aging in Older Women: What Have We Learned From the Women's Health Initiative?”
  - \* “Dynamics of Mobility Accommodation With Assistive Technology: Findings From the Women’s Health and Aging Study”
  - \* “Thinking Outside the Mental Health Box: New Applications for Existing Technology”
- For more information, visit <http://www.agingconference.com>.

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Event: MindAlert Workshop: New Ideas for Creative Mental Stimulation

Date: Nov. 30, 2006

Location: Chicago

Mental fitness enhances quality of life, promotes adaptability, and preserves independence. The goal of this workshop, which is sponsored by American Society on Aging, MetLife Foundation, Archstone Foundation, and Rush University Medical Center, is to stimulate various parts of the brain through a variety of learning experiences. The workshop includes discussion on how professionals can promote mental fitness in a variety of settings. For more information, visit <http://www.asaging.org/asav2/mindalert/>.

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Event: Choices for Independence: A National Leadership Summit

Dates: Dec. 5-6, 2006

Location: Washington, D.C.

At the Choices Summit, the U.S. Administration on Aging, the aging network, and other federal, state, tribal, and local leaders will engage in a peer-to-peer exchange of strategies and tools for helping older people remain healthy and independent. The summit will also address improving access to healthcare and long-term care, developing community-based services to help elders stay in their own homes, and helping older people stay active and healthy. For more information, visit <http://www.aoa.gov/Choices/Summit/summithome.htm>.

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For more educational offerings in the field of aging, visit the searchable “Events in Aging” calendar on the ASA website: <http://www.asaging.org/calendar>.

Have an event related to health promotion and aging that you would like to tell your colleagues about? Please submit your event, call for papers, or grant announcements to Betsy Dorsett at [betsyd@asaging.org](mailto:betsyd@asaging.org). Include the title, organization, date and time, location, contact information, and a short description of the event.

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## HEALTHWORD

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**SUGGESTIONS AND QUESTIONS.** For more information or comments about the newsletter, please contact Chaya Gordon, senior research manager at ASA, at [chayag@asaging.org](mailto:chayag@asaging.org).

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