

Boost Your Brain: Fun Activities & Social Engagement to Keep Your Mind Sharp

Mental stimulation involves activities and experiences that engage and challenge the brain, which can promote cognitive function and well-being. While no single activity guarantees the prevention of dementia, evidence indicates that engaging in various forms of mental stimulation can contribute to overall brain health. This includes activities, such as working on puzzles or reading. It can also involve learning new skills, such as how to play a musical instrument, learn a new language, or take a class on something that interests you.

Social engagement is also important to well-being and brain health, as it provides mental stimulation and emotional support. It also helps to reduce stress and loneliness, which can have detrimental effects on health.

Frequently Asked Questions for Cognitive & Social Activities

1. How many minutes a day should you spend on mentally stimulating activities? Research hasn't shown a clear answer for this, but even 30 to 60 minutes a few days per week is associated with improvements in cognitive function in older adults, including adults with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and dementia.
2. What type of activity is best for brain health? Mix it up! Aerobic, Mentally Challenging, Social, and Mindfulness activities are all associated with better health and lower risk for MCI. Doing a variety of activities that are both enjoyable and challenging for the brain is associated with a lower risk for cognitive decline. These include craft activities and playing games such as bingo or cribbage, reading a book, knitting, woodworking, painting, and/or drawing.
3. What if you try something and it isn't enjoyable? New things can be challenging, but each time you try, you're helping to build those connections in your brain. It can take a bit longer than for younger learners, persistence and practice can yield great results. However if something really isn't working, try something else and don't get discouraged. We have listed some ideas to help you get started!
4. Am I too old? People of all ages can learn and grow. The brain remains capable of forming new connections and adapting throughout life. Maintaining a positive outlook in the face of challenges that come with aging is a key tool to better brain health. Research has found that the more you believe negative stereotypes apply to you, the more likely you are to see a decline in your mental and physical well-being. On the other hand, having a positive mindset towards aging has been shown to improve health behaviors and quality of life. Focus on your progress rather than perfection and consider adjusting your approach or trying different learning methods if you get stuck.

5. What's the best way to start learning something new? Break the learning process into manageable steps and don't hesitate to ask for help or seek mentorship. Many adults successfully learn new languages and instruments.
6. How do you make new friends to increase your social network? Find people that you relate to! Participate in group activities as this offers opportunities to meet new people and bond over a common interest. Be open to reaching out first!
7. If you don't drive, what can you do to stay connected? Technology has become an important tool for staying in contact with others. Specifically, social media has become a great way to communicate with others and explore new communities! Staying connected online has been associated with a more positive mood and reduced loneliness in older adults with smaller social networks (Kim & Fingerman, 2022). For those less tech-savvy, the *Maine Digital Inclusive Initiative* offers lessons to help them learn skills. See below for details.

Ideas to Get Started & Resources

Play stimulating brain games that require mental effort to play. For instance:

- Jigsaw puzzles
- Sudoku and crossword puzzles
- Word riddles
- Chess
- Bingo
- Mahjong
- Cribbage
- Wii and PlayStation offer a variety of games that can stimulate hand-eye coordination

Learn New Things & Challenge Yourself

Learning and doing new things challenges the brain and promotes neural resilience.

- Learn a new language
- Learn to play an instrument
- Learn a new creative activity, like painting, creative writing, photography, dancing, woodworking, or knitting
- Learn a new skill, like juggling, new yoga poses, or how to fold origami
- Learn mindfulness and meditation practices. Mindfulness and meditation practices require attention and increase awareness. When done regularly, they can help reduce stress and help feelings of overall health and well-being.
- Take a course that you find interesting at the library, college, online, and so on!
- Watch "TED Talks" to learn from experts on current topics on education, business, science (e.g., biology, psychology, and neuroscience), tech, and

creativity. TED Talks present new ideas in more everyday language making complex concepts easier to understand.

- Watch television game shows and try to figure out the answers
- Play charades or Trivia Pursuit with friends
- Use your non-dominant hand to do routine tasks. For instance, if you are right-handed, try using your left hand to unload the dishwasher, use the computer mouse, and so on!
- Take new routes when you go on walks or drive
- Read a magazine, newspaper article, or book and try to recall as much information as possible
- Practice recalling information from your day or past, such as remembering details of how you came into possession of cherished items
- Tech tutoring helps you learn how to use a particular website or program, organize emails, and most other technology needs. Older adults can learn new skills, gain confidence in using their computer or electronic device, and engage online safely.

Be Creative

Creativity can increase mental stimulation! Drawing, painting, knitting, crocheting, writing, or another method can all improve your mood, reduce stress, and give you a sense of purpose. Here are some creative activities:

- Listen to music
- Read a new book
- Draw, paint, write, and craft (e.g., woodworking, whittling, knitting, crocheting, home brewing)
- Write a story
- Take up cooking – this can also be a way to learn about other cultures by exploring different foods and spices used
- Go to a comedy show

Ways to Increase Social Connections

Being socially active is important as social isolation and feelings of loneliness are known to have negative impacts on our brains. Specifically, people who feel lonely or are isolated from others have higher risks for chronic health conditions, mental health conditions, weakened immune systems, and cognitive decline. Retirement, less income, physical and/or cognitive health concerns, loss of loved ones, and limited community resources can limit having meaningful social connections. The following lists ideas to increase your social engagement and social connections.

Nurture Existing Relationships and Create New Ones

- Initiate conversations on topics that interest you or things that you would like to know more about
- Teach someone else something you know well, like how to tie knots or one of your favorite hobbies
- Go to the Farmer's Markets in your area – this is a great way to talk to people and get healthy food! Many markets now accept SNAP.
- Invite family members and friends to learn and do new things with you
- Invite people over or to go out with you
- Schedule times to visit or call others each day
- Stay in contact on social media
- Reconnect with old friends
- See your neighbors? Say “hi” to them and strike up new conversations.

Engage In Group Activities and Social Events

Taking courses and workshops will let you dive deep into a topic of interest while also engaging with your peers.

- Join nature groups, such as the Audubon Society
- Book clubs can help keep the brain alert and active by thinking critically about what you read and helping build social connections.
- Volunteer through local organizations, examples may be libraries, schools, or societies
- Be a mentor in your community or to those in need
- Get involved in a community event, like organizing a 5k or a local celebration
- Visit local community wellness or senior centers
- Group exercise classes, like those held at gyms and recreational centers, encourage physical activity while building social connections.
- Revisit an old hobby by joining a group, like “Stitch & Sip” clubs, book clubs, swim groups, or a bowling league
- Join a walking group, such as Mall Walkers
- Attend local town halls, board meetings, or city council meetings to increase community involvement and build friendships
- Attend a play, concert, or other public event and talk to someone new
- Attend religious or spiritual gatherings
- Attend Bingo and other card games

Community-Based Resources

The following is a list of in-person resources that offer a variety of activities for physical, social, and mental engagement. Note that activities and costs listed for each location are subject to change, and there are additional resources that may not be included in this list.

Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs)

There are five Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) in Maine that serve as “one-stop-shops”. In addition to service connections to help with meals, hospice and caregiving, regional agencies on aging offer many engaging activities. For instance, the Eastern Area Agency on Aging serves Penobscot County and other AAA may be found here:

<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/oads/get-support/older-adults-disabilities/area-agencies-on-aging>.

EAAA Durgin Center

Phone: (207) 941-2865 Address: 274 State St, Brewer, ME

Website: <https://eaaa.org/classes-events/>

- Cost: \$3 per class
- Example activities: Mahjong, Cribbage, Bridge, and Chair Yoga
- Caregiver support includes information and assistance for available services, a caregiver respite program, and caregiver support groups.

EAAA Community Cafes

Phone: (207) 941-2865 Located: Brewer, Brooksville, Calais, Millinocket, Milo, and Penobscot

Website: <https://eaaa.org/social-dining/>

- Cost: Free for 60 or older, although \$7 is encouraged if able to donate
- Community Cafes are places to enjoy delicious meals, socialize with others, catch up on the local news, play games, and listen to music to make the day fun.

Community Activities & Education

Audubon Society

Phone: (207) 781-2330 Locations: Downeast, Merrymeeting, Mid-Coast, Penobscot Valley, Fundy, Western Maine, and York County Chapters

Website: <https://maineaudubon.org/>

- Cost: \$30

- Offers opportunities to walk on trails, observe birds and other wildlife, fish, and volunteer.

Bangor Adult and Community Education

Phone: (207) 941-6316 Address: 121 York St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://bangor.maineadulted.org>

- Cost: Prices vary depending on course. Ranging from \$5 to \$155 with other travel programs costing more.
- Offers a variety of courses on topics including painting, cooking, gardening, technology, retirement, and yoga.

Bangor YMCA Second Wind Social Club

Phone: (207) 941-2808 Address: 17 2nd St, Bangor, ME

Website:

<https://bangory.org/fitness/health-management/activities-for-older-adults/>

- Membership Cost: \$41 per month for adults aged 62 or older, there is a [sliding scale fee](#) for those who are eligible. A Social Membership is also available.

Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets

Website: <https://mainefarmersmarkets.org/shoppers/markets-by-day/>

- Location: Find a Farmer's Market in your area using the link above.

Penobscot Valley Senior College

Phone: (207) 659-1359 Address: Online or in person at PVSC 499 Broadway PMB #274, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://pvsc.myrec.com/info/default.aspx>

- Cost: Annual membership is \$25 per person or \$40 for two people from the same household. There is an additional \$30 tuition fee for each course taken.
- Offers a variety of course topics with in-person, online, and hybrid classes. Classes typically meet for two hours, once a week for four to eight weeks.

University of Maine Center on Aging

Phone: (207) 262-7920 Address: Camden Hall 25 Texas Ave, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/>

- Promotes education opportunities, research, and resources for older adults to improve their quality of life. Contact the Center to learn more about upcoming opportunities.

- Offers multiple volunteer programs throughout Maine, including Retired and Senior Volunteer, Senior Companion, Bone Builders, and Walking Buddy Programs.

University of Southern Maine Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

Phone: (207) 780-4406 Address: Online or in person at Wishcamper Center, Room 210, 44 Bedford St Portland, Maine 04101

Website:

<https://usm.maine.edu/osher-lifelong-learning-institute/classes-programs/>

- Cost: Annual membership fee is now \$35 per person. There is an additional \$50 tuition fee per course taken.
- They typically offer over 50 courses, with in-person, online, hybrid, and blended class options. Their course catalog and membership registration can be found on their website. Each class is two hours and meets once a week for 4 to 8 weeks.

Public Libraries are not just for books! They offer computer skill training, have concerts, art exhibits, and the list goes on! The following are contacts for libraries within the greater Bangor area and [this link](#) will take you to the Public Library Directory for all of Maine.

Bangor Public Library

Phone: (207) 947-8336 Address: 145 Harlow St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://bangorpubliclibrary.org>

- Cost: Free
- Example activities: Art Exhibits, Book Club, Coffee and Conversation, Stitch and Sip, Tech Tutoring

Brewer Public Library

Phone: (207) 989-7943 Address: 100 S Main St, Brewer, ME

Website: <https://brewermaine.gov/library/>

- Cost: Free
- Example activities: Book Club, Board Games, Knitting Social

Orono Public Library

Phone: (207) 866-5060 Address: 39 Pine St, Orono, ME

Website: <https://www.orono.org/778/Public-Library>

- Cost: Free

- Example activities: Conversation Tables, Book Club, Opera Discussions, Yarn Social

Old Town Public Library

Phone: (207) 827-3972 Address: 46 Middle St, Old Town, ME

Website: <https://old-town.lib.me.us/adult>

- Cost: Free
- Example activities: Book Club, Card Games, Sit 'n Stitch, Tuesday Forum

Maine Digital Inclusive Initiative (Part of the National Digital Equity Center)

Phone: (207) 259-5010

Website: <https://digitalequitycenter.org/classes/>

- Cost: Free
- Provides digital skills training through 40+ classes for three areas: Work & Business, Home & Education, & Aging Well With Technology

Explore the Arts

Collins Center for the Arts

Phone: (207) 581-1755 Address: 2 Flagstaff Rd, Orono, ME 04473

Website: <https://www.collinscenterforthearts.com/>

- Cost: Varies by event
- A performing arts theater that hosts concerts, plays, ballets, movies, and more. It also features the Hudson Museum, which is filled with Native artifacts.

Penobscot Theater Company

Phone: (207) 942-3333 Location: 131 Main St, Bangor, ME, 04401

Website: <https://www.penobscottheatre.org/>

- Cost: \$32 to \$42
- A performing arts theater that hosts plays and musicals for public enjoyment.
- Offers volunteer opportunities such as administration, costume and set design, publicity, and more.

Surry Arts and Events at the Barn

Phone: (207) 667-1308 Location: 8 Cross Road, Surry, ME, 04684

Website: <https://surryartsandevents.com/2024-season-schedule/>

- Cost: varies
- Offers a range of music and artistic events.

UMaine School of Performing Arts

Phone: (207) 581-4703 Address: 5788 Class of 1944 Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5788

Website: <https://umaine.edu/spa/events/>

- Cost: \$0 to \$12
- A performing arts theater that hosts concerts, dance performances, and plays in various venues across the University of Maine campus. Features performances from both students and faculty.

Ways to Volunteer

Bangor Area Homeless Shelter

Phone: (207) 947-0092 Address: 263 Main St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://www.bangorareashelter.org/volunteering/>

- Cook and donate a meal or help them serve dinner to people staying in the shelter or using the Warming Center.

Bangor Historical Society

Phone: (207) 942-1900 Address: 159 Union St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://www.bangorhistoricalsociety.org/>

- Volunteer as a museum guide, walking tour guide, research assistant, museum caretaker, and more.

Bangor Humane Society

Phone: (207) 942-8902 Address: 693 Mt Hope Ave, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://www.bangorhumane.org/get-involved/volunteer/>

- Walk dogs, clean kennels, participate in events, and more.

Good Shepherd Food Bank

Phone: (207) 989-4672 Address: 11 Penobscot Meadow Dr, Hampden, ME

Website: <https://www.gsfb.org/>

- Pack food donations, assist community cooking classes, complete administrative work, and more.

Habitat for Humanity of Greater Bangor ReStore Program

Phone: (207) 992-0704 Address: 378 Harlow St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://www.habitatbangor.org/restore-volunteers>

- Greet and assist customers, accept donations, prepare items for the sales floor, and maintain a clean and safe environment.

Maine Extension Homemaker Volunteers

Phone: (207) 581-3188 Address: 15 Estabrooke Dr, Orono, ME

Website: <https://www.habitatbangor.org/restore-volunteers>

- Develop leaderships, support worthy community causes, and promote the UMaine Cooperative Extension's educational programs throughout Maine.

Penquis Foster Grandparent Program

Phone: (207) 973-3611 Address: 262 Harlow St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://www.penquis.org/volunteer-opportunities/>

- Volunteers help children with special needs with school work and life skills and serve 15-36 hours on average weekly.

Instrumental Support

The following is a list of home and personal support resources for patients and caregivers, including Day Programs, Transportation Services, and Support Groups. Costs are not reported as they vary widely by program, location, and services requested. Some programs, like many through Healthy Aging for ME, may be free.

Bridges Home Services

Phone: (207) 623-0761 Location: Waterville, Hallowell, Skohegan, and Belfast

Website: <https://www.bridgeshomeservices.org/>

- Provides adult day care services, personal and community support services, and community case management.

Healthy Living for ME

Phone: (800) 620-6036 Locations: May be online or in-person throughout Maine

Website: <https://healthylivingforme.org/workshops/all-programs/>

- Holds workshops to help older adults stay active and prevent falls, live well with chronic conditions, and support services for caregivers.

Lynx Mobility Services

Phone: (207) 973-3695 Located: Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties

Website: <https://thrivepenobscot.org/services/transportation/>

- Provides transportation for shopping, appointments, or meeting friends.

My Friends Place

Phone: (207) 945-0122 Address: 703 Essex St, Bangor, ME

Website: <https://myfriendsplaceprogram.com/>

- Provides a safe and friendly environment for older adults with memory loss or dementia. They also provide support services for caregivers.

Seniors on the Go

Locations: Auburn, Augusta, Bangor, Brunswick, Camden/Rockport, Kennebunk, Moultonborough, Portland, Portsmouth

Website: <https://www.seniorsonthego.com/>

- Provides senior care planning, household support, social companionship, personal care services and support, handyman services, multi-generational family support, and specialty, memory, and hospice care.

Thrive Penobscot

Phone: (207) 723-5288 Located: 899 Central St, Millinocket, ME

Website: <https://thrivepenobscot.org/>

- Provides resources for food, transportation, legal and financial services, home support, medical services, and volunteer opportunities.

University of Maine Center on Aging Senior Companion Program

Phone: (207) 262-7927 Located: Androscoggin, Franklin, Hancock, Kennebec, Knox, Oxford, Penobscot, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo, and Washington Counties

Website:

<https://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/service/senior-companion-program/>

- A “neighbors helping neighbors” program, volunteers help other older adults remain independent and live at home.

Visiting Angels

Phone: (207) 573-1861 Located: Bangor, Brewer, Hampden, Orono, Old Town, and the surrounding area

Website: <https://www.visitingangels.com/bangor/home>

- Provides companion, personal, and palliative care to assist older adults and their caregivers to stay happy and healthy at home. They also have a Ready-Set-Go Home program to help older adults transition out of hospital admissions.

Online Resources

The following is a list of online resources to help keep you mentally and socially engaged. Activities and costs listed for each location are subject to change, and there are additional resources that may not be included in this list.

AARP Connect2Affect provides isolation assessment and resources to connect with local support groups and services.

- Website: <https://connect2affect.org/>

AARP Games has online and mobile application games such as chess, card games, puzzles, and word games. You can also connect with and play against other people!

- Website: <https://www.aarp.org/games/>

AARP Virtual Community Center has free interactive virtual events and classes to help older adults and caregivers learn and have fun.

- Website: <https://local.aarp.org/virtual-community-center/>

Aging in Maine offers resources for various organizations to assist older adults and their caregivers, including government programs, nutrition assistance, education, and wellness and enrichment.

- Website: <https://aginginmaine.com/senior-assistance-resources/>

Alzheimer's Association hosts support groups for caregivers throughout Maine and online.

- Website: https://www.alz.org/maine/helping_you/support-groups

Alzheimer's Foundation of America - The AFA Teal Room offers recordings of online virtual courses related to creative arts, musical performances, and nature programs.

- Website: <https://alzfdn.org/afatealroom/>

Alzheimer's and Dementia Blog provides links to resources for viewing animals, museums, musical or theatrical performances, tours of travel and outdoors, physical activities, mindfulness meditation, and more.

- Website: <https://www.alzheimersblog.org/onlineactivities/>

Apps for meditation. **Insight Timer**, **Headspace**, and **Calm** are helpful applications for mindfulness and meditation practices, regardless of whether you have been doing this for a long time or are just starting.

- Website: <https://insighttimer.com/>
- Website: <http://www.headspace.com/>
- Website: <http://www.calm.com/>

BrainHQ is an online resource with free and paid options for older adults to practice a variety of brain exercises with specialized games for memory, attention, speed, and more.

- Website: <https://www.brainhq.com/>

Maine Senior College Network provides information on the 17 Senior Colleges located throughout Maine.

- Website: <https://www.maineseniorcollege.org/>

National Digital Equity Center has online classes to teach older adults about different technology uses.

- Website: <https://digitalequitycenter.org/classes/>

New York Times Games has free online and mobile games including wordle, daily crosswords, mini crosswords, spelling bee, and more

- Website: <https://www.nytimes.com/crosswords>

Seasoned Times and **Keeping Busy** are two online resources for printable puzzles and games for older adults to be mentally engaged.

- Website: <https://seasonedtimes.com/>
- Website: <https://keepingbusy.com/>

Senior Planet from AARP hosts live online classes on topics related to computers and technology, crafting, fitness, and more.

- Website: <https://seniorplanet.org/classes/>

Stanford Health Care currently has free virtual classes in art therapy and improv for dementia, as well as virtual exercise programs.

- Website: <https://stanfordhealthcare.org/for-patients-visitors/neuroscience-supportive-care-program.html>

Stanford and **HarvardX** have online classes with no formal application process, and all adults are welcome to attend. Topics vary and include courses related to health and medicine, engineering and science, arts and humanities, and more.

- Website: <https://online.stanford.edu/free-courses>
- Website: <https://www.edx.org/school/harvardx#programs>

Storyworth is an online subscription that prompts a person to respond to questions once a week. You and your loved one can also write your own questions or insert pictures into their responses. After one year, Storyworth will compile your responses into a book, of which you can order multiple copies.

- Website: <https://welcome.storyworth.com/>