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Bridge to a Better Brain (<http://www.sanclementetimes.com/bridge-better-brain/>)

By Staff (<http://www.sanclementetimes.com/author/pfmeditorial/>) On September 26, 2018

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Living a healthy lifestyle, learning and interacting all have positive impacts on the brain

By Alex Groves

Almost every day of the week, dozens of people pack a room in a business park off Ortega Highway; a look of concentration is etched on most of their faces and their voices are low.

This group, mostly retirees, are playing bridge at the South Orange County Bridge Center. It's a card game that has four players pair up in partnerships against each other and try to score points by making bids or defeating the other team's bid.

If there's one thing for certain, it's that bridge is a mentally challenging game and that's just what the players in attendance are looking for.

"The lion's share of our people are retired but they're very, very sharp retirees because this is not an easy game," said Janie Matlaf, who's in charge of publicity for the center. "This is a game that's very challenging so people that are playing bridge are really staying off all the different mental challenges that we face as we age."

Matlaf may be right on that point.



Visitors pack the South Orange County Bridge Center during a weekday. The game is not only fun, but also educational and a good brain exercise, a spokeswoman says. Photo: Alex Groves

Kim Bailey, Program and Education Specialist for Alzheimer's Orange County, said her organization emphasizes four pillars for successful aging and those are cognitive stimulation, physical exercise, a healthy diet and social engagement.

Bailey said that there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that those four pillars together not only help to keep a person healthy, but could help prevent Alzheimer's disease

She said that cognitive stimulation can be something like attending classes, doing computer games or learning a new language. She said that's because those things stimulate new connections in the brain that might not have previously been there.

Physical exercise, another pillar, is something that doesn't need to necessarily be strenuous to have an impact, Bailey said. She noted that even small adjustments like walking around the block a couple times a week or doing chair exercises can be enough to make an impact.

Food is another important component, with Bailey noting that heart-healthy diets are ultimately brain-healthy diets. She recommends that seniors make sure they're eating adequate amounts of fruits, vegetable and healthy proteins.

Bailey said social engagement is also a key to health but it's not something that a lot of seniors think about as they age.

"With some seniors they become isolated over time and that's not good and there are a lot of negative outcomes that come with being isolated," she said.

Bailey said that something like bridge is exactly the kind of thing that can help keep a senior sharp.

"That's an excellent way for well seniors to prevent Alzheimer's because that's a complex game so they're really going to use their brains in ways that they haven't and the added plus is there's going to be social engagement as well," she said.

Bailey cautioned that taking these actions don't necessarily prevent a person from getting Alzheimer's. It's entirely possible that a person can do everything right and still end up with the condition.

However, she said that taking those steps are still important for a person's physical and emotional well-being.

Matlaf said she's still getting a lot of value out of playing bridge and plans to make that one of her learning activities of choice for the foreseeable future.

"I learn something new every single day," she said. "It's just so challenging. You never get over dealing with challenges and there are so many different styles of playing."

The company of other people counts for a lot as well, she said.

"People that are beginning level players are having a wonderful time even though they don't know a whole lot of things," she said.

The center recently started two new classes for beginners, one on Tuesdays at 9:30 a.m. and one on Wednesdays at 9 a.m. People who would like to participate in the classes should sign up quickly by contacting martimoss43@gmail.com (mailto:martimoss43@gmail.com) for Tuesday classes and fleurpdlur@cox.net (mailto:fleurpdlur@cox.net) for Wednesday classes.

The South Orange County Bridge Center is located at 34161 Rancho Viejo Road. For more information, call 949.248.1268.

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