

UCLA memory fitness program improves memory abilities of oldest adults

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Who hasn't forgotten someone's name, misplaced their glasses or walked into a room and not remembered why they entered? Normal age-related memory decline affects more than half of all seniors, and those over 80 are the most vulnerable.

A new UCLA study has found that a memory fitness program offered to older adults in their senior living communities helped improve their ability to recognize and recall words, benefitting their verbal learning and retention.

Published in the September issue of the [American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry](#), the study also found that as a result of the program, seniors' self-perceived memory improved, an important factor in maintaining a positive outlook on life while aging. The average age of participants in the study was 81.

"It was exciting to see how much older adults participate in a memory fitness program and improve," said study author Dr. Karen Miller, an associate clinical professor at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA. "The study demonstrates that it's never too late to learn new skills to enhance one's life."

As people get older, it takes longer to learn new information and to retrieve it, including names, dates, the location of household objects, meetings, and appointments, according to the study's senior author, Dr. Gary Small, UCLA's Parlow-Solomon Professor on Aging and director

of the UCLA Longevity Center.

The six-week, 12-session program differed from other cognitive training courses in that it offered not only memory-training techniques but also education about [lifestyle factors](#) that may impact memory ability and overall [brain health](#). Participants learned stress-reduction exercises and were instructed about the importance of daily [physical exercise](#) and maintaining a healthy diet rich in antioxidants.

"Lifestyle and environmental factors may play a role in [cognitive decline](#), so our program included education about healthy living in addition to memory-training techniques," said Small, who is also a professor at the Semel Institute.

Although the UCLA team has offered similar programs in other settings, such as at senior centers and on the UCLA campus, this is one of the first times that such a comprehensive memory program has been designed for and offered in a retirement living community. This made participation easier, since seniors in most cases simply walked down a hallway rather than having to drive to a class off-site.

The study involved 115 seniors at two full-service retirement communities in Maryland that are part of Erickson Living, a leading continuing-care community developer and manager. Participants lived in the "independent" level of care in these communities and had memory complaints, but they had not been diagnosed with dementia and were not taking any medications for memory loss.

Half the participants were enrolled in the memory fitness program and received memory testing before beginning the program and after completion to assess improvement. The other half were placed on a waiting list for the program and acted as study controls.

Miller and Small developed a scripted curriculum for trainers who led the classes, and they provided a companion workbook for participants. Trainers in the study were employees of the Erickson Living retirement communities and had backgrounds in academia and health-related fields.

The one-hour education sessions focused on memory enhancement. They included explanations of how memory works; offered quick strategies for remembering names, faces and numbers; and provided basic memory tools such as linking ideas and creating visual images. Trainers also discussed the role of a healthy lifestyle in protecting and maintaining memory.

Among the older adults attending the classes, the researchers found marked improvement in verbal memory, as well as improvements in how they perceived their memory, compared with the controls.

"We found that the memory fitness program was readily accepted by residents in our senior living communities and that it directly benefited many of them," said John Parrish, Ph.D., executive director of the Erickson Foundation. "In fact, we are now offering the program in nearly all of our 16 communities across the nation."

"The study suggests that the [memory fitness program](#) may be a cost-effective means of addressing some of the memory-related concerns of healthy [older adults](#)," Parrish added.

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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