Mind-body maximizes benefits of exercise to seniors

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By 2035, a third of the Canadian population will be over 60 years old. And Kinesiology PhD student Nárlon Boa Sorte Silva wants to make sure every one of them stays active and engaged in life via exercise.

In a recent study, Boa Sorte Silva showed that mind-motor training – an activity that simultaneously engages both cognitive function and movement – used in association with regular exercise helped older adults stave off the effects of dementia more than just regular exercise alone. These findings could open the door to new physical activity programs and approaches for older adults.

"When we think of older population's needs, in terms of overall health, it is exercise. But we also need to think of cognition," Boa Sorte Silva explained. "We want to target cognitive health as well as overall health."

Originally, Boa Sorte Silva arrived at Western in 2014 for a three-month research project with Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry and Kinesiology professor Robert Petrella. He has since been fast-tracked for his PhD in Kinesiology.

In his recent research project, conducted in association with Petrella, Boa Sorte Silva followed two groups taking part in exercise programs: One group focused on exercise alone. A second group focused on exercise combined with mind-motor training, in this case, a square-stepping exercise on a gridded floor mat.

With the mind-motor training, subjects performed stepping patterns that slowly got more complicated. They watched a pattern and then attempted to repeat it.

Boa Sorte Silva recently presented his research at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference this past month in London, England.

The study found the group that combined exercise and mind-motor training showed greater improvement in cognition, global cognitive functioning and memory. As a side benefit, Boa Sorte Silva said group

participants were more socially engaged, as the mind-motor training required participants to encourage and help each other out.

"They become more self-aware of the importance of training cognition and mobility," he said.

Petrella agreed. Earlier studies showed that older people who are more socially engaged tend to be more cognitively intact and enjoy life more.

"It's not just about exercise. We know epidemiologically exercise is associated with having better cognitive function. But if you can think about other ways people improve their cognitive ability in the long term – such as puzzles and dancing – all those things may have an impact," Petrella said.

In certain regions of the brain, mobility and cognitive functions co-exist. If you can make a change to that part of the brain, you could can get dual benefit. "And we're finding that," Petrella said.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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