

Bulletin Board

Gray Matters

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By [Bay Area Older Adults \(Open Post\)](#) - May 9, 2016 9:39 pm ET

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Do you remember learning about gray matter in high school? The human brain's gray matter is the powerhouse of the brain, consuming 94% of the oxygen. Over the past two decades, scientists have discovered that gray matter shrinks as we age, and this has been associated with memory loss and dementia. Fortunately, studies published by the Alzheimer's Association tout lifelong learning, social engagement and a healthy diet as the most important ways to prevent this cognitive decline.

According to the latest census, adults age 50+ constitute more than 30% of Santa Clara County's residents. This means it is vital for our communities to offer programs that promote a high quality of life and independent living for older adults. For more than four years, the nonprofit organization, Bay Area Older Adults (BAO), has encouraged lifelong learning, social engagement and health awareness through its Healthy Living™ Program. As one participant, Kimberly says "Going to these lectures means I am always learning something new which is good for the ol' grey matter!"

Of course, lifelong learning is an important reason why older adults attend the seminars, but another unique benefit of the program is fellowship with other older adults. As lecture attendee Jill explains, "In addition to the value of the information presented, I value getting to know other older adults. It enhances my feeling of self-worth and dignity. We are all fascinating, vibrant and diverse people." As another senior reveals "Going to the lectures gives me social interaction that keeps me from being isolated at home." As indicated by Mayo Clinic and many other prominent academic institutions that performed research studies since the late 1970's, socialization is critical for maintaining a high quality of life and independent living as we age.

Participants note that BAO lectures are different from others they have attended in other ways. For example, the welcoming, interactive and intimate format enables them to feel "comfortable asking questions, which

adds an important dimension to my learning," as one participant expressed. The program's relaxed, open and friendly atmosphere is rare. "At other lectures, people arrive, sit down, face forward, and don't make eye contact and most leave without ever speaking to anyone." There is time before and after the lecture to meet other participants and people feel free to interrupt the speaker to ask questions during the seminar.

About half of the lecture topics are relevant to daily life and geared toward providing a solid understanding of the science of health. This helps older adults make educated decisions about their diet and health in general, and gives them the confidence to ask their doctors critical questions.

Dr. Nusrat Khaleeli, who has presented and will present again in November on probiotics and the microbiome explains, "There is a lot of misinformation in the media and it is important that we explain, in an easily understandable manner, the science underlying the different ways we can stay healthy as we age." As attendee Barbara W. conveys, "I was surprised by how little I knew about my own body and how to maintain a high level of health by simple changes to my life and eating habits.

Other subject matter is fun. Dr. Anne Ferguson, BAO's Executive Director explains, "Most of us have watched at least one of the forensic TV shows like CSI and Dexter, so every year we have a captivating seminar called Crime Scene Investigation Bay Area where we take a virtual tour of the different labs in a real criminalistics department and hear real Bay Area crime stories." Other lectures are culturally and historically relevant. For example, in June, Ann-Marie Sayers, Director of Costanoan Indian Research and an Ohlone Indian, will speak about the history and culture of Ohlone Indians in the Bay Area.

One of BAO's important partners is San José Public Library that has a network of 21 branches with state-of-the-art community rooms. "This collaboration is important," says Dr. Ferguson, "because San José Public Library gives us access to high-quality facilities that are a hub for community services and are easily accessible to older adults." Vidya Kilambi, Manager at the Calabazas Branch, appreciates the partnership because "BAO has a history of high-quality services that complement our San José libraries." As Renee Gimelli, Educational Park Branch Librarian describes "Our partnership with BAO allows us to offer unique educational programs that promote the mental health and intellectual curiosity of older adults. The seminars inspire and educate our residents about health-related topics relevant to their daily lives. All of their lecturers are experts in their field, and many are Ph.D. scientists."

The lectures are located throughout Santa Clara County, which makes the program accessible to a diverse group of seniors. To learn more about the BAO Healthy Living Program, please visit <http://www.bayareaolderadults.org/BAO-group-events> and click "Educational Lecture Series."

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