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## Public Libraries: Community-Based Health Clubs for the Brain

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Public libraries have long offered the public more than books. And now, recent demographic and scientific trends are converging to fundamentally transform the role of libraries in our culture. Libraries are taking on a new mission: to help promote cognitive health in their communities, potentially using the concept of brain fitness as a framework for library-based lifelong learning, civic engagement, gaming and health promotion initiatives.

Last fall, I delivered a talk, “The Emerging Brain Fitness Field: Research and Implications,” to the librarians at The New York Public Library (NYPL). This included a “brain 101” overview (a basic introduction to the brain and brain fitness) and discussion of the growing research about how lifestyle factors contribute to lifelong cognitive health. The session, which also discussed how to navigate through the emerging, sometimes confusing, field of brain fitness, was part of NYPL’s first Health & Wellness Month. This month-long series of lectures for library staff—with topics ranging from nutrition to stress management and exercise—turned out to be influential in creating major health events for older adults.

### NEW, ENGAGING INITIATIVES

Two new trends are emerging around our public libraries. Libraries now are focusing more on health and wellness promotion in order to engage older adults, and cognitive health, or brain fitness, is becoming a significant component of that promotion.

U.S. Public Census data illuminates why libraries need to cater to an older audience. From the years 2000–2020, the number of Americans over age 55 is expected to increase from under 60 million to nearly 100 million. This increase is due to expanded longevity and to the baby boomer generation moving up the population pyramid.

Brain health provides a unique opportunity for libraries to engage active baby boomers and elders. Rohit Burman, manager of culture and public broadcasting at MetLife Foundation in New York, explains, “Last year we identified a growing interest by boomers and seniors on brain health issues and thought that public libraries, as community and learning hubs, could play a major role. We decided to launch, in collaboration with the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives and Libraries for the Future, a new iteration of the Fit for Life program, focused squarely on promoting brain fitness.”

This year, the Fit for Life program is supporting 17 library systems in launching new initiatives to promote brain health via the following research-based lifestyle factors: diet, physical exercise, intellectual challenge, mental stimulation through new experiences and socialization.

Libraries nationwide are using other new programs to promote brain health. One example is the Lifelong Access Libraries Initiative, funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, which is an all-inclusive way for older adults to improve their brain fitness through civic engagement.

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#### THE GAME IS ON

Gaming, thanks to the Nintendo Wii, is quickly becoming a major opportunity to foster inter-generational activities. At least 18 of the 89 NYPL locations ordered Wii gaming equipment and software programs in 2008, for both in-library use and to be checked out. The American Library Association celebrated the first “National Gaming @ Your Library Day” on November 15, 2008, encompassing both board and videogames.

Brigid Cahalan, an older adult services specialist at NYPL, says that Wii gaming has become one of the most popular activities that engages older adults in the libraries. Previously, more traditional computer classes had long been the major attraction. Says Cahalan, “If we want to become hubs of learning and community activity, we need to offer new types of social activities.” Gaming has turned out to be working well in attracting elders, with library staffs helping to create intergenerational activities and classes where teens teach and interact with older adults.

As libraries engage older adults with innovative lifelong learning, civic engagement, gaming, health and wellness promotion programs and events, it appears that brain fitness is the glue that binds these activities together. This raises an interesting question for librarians and professionals in the fields of aging and lifelong learning to consider: In the future, could public libraries be transformed into health centers for the mind and brain?

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#### HEALTH CLUBS FOR THE BRAIN

Marzena Ermler, NYPL coordinator of professional development, believes that libraries need to “help people understand that libraries are healthy places for them to go. Lifelong learning is not just for advancement, but to stay sharp and healthy as we age.”

Pauline Rothstein, coeditor of the American Library Association’s *Longevity and Libraries: Unexpected Voices* (to be published in late 2009), recommends that libraries “think of brain fitness as the new concept that can help integrate diverse activities, identify additional needed resources and explain our value to society. It makes sense to start with specific programming, and use a new framework to evaluate a variety of library services.”

Rothstein believes that libraries need to stop focusing so much on objects—such as buildings, books and DVDs—and instead focus on services. They must explore the questions of how they educate and how they help the public navigate the escalating avalanche of information that deals with how to keep our brains healthy. This evolution will require libraries to proactively listen to community expectations, and to partner with local organizations, such as senior centers, to meet new requirements.

If libraries were reshaped as health clubs of the brain and the mind, they could become vital information centers and dynamic destinations for brain fitness programs, which would provide a crucial service to America’s aging population. ♦

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## Books on the Brain

The following books are helpful resources in understanding the growing field of brain fitness.

***The SharpBrains Guide to Brain Fitness: 18 Interviews with Scientists, Practical Advice, and Product Reviews, to Keep Your Brain Sharp* (San Francisco, Calif.: SharpBrains, Inc., 2009) by Alvaro Fernandez and Dr. Elkhonon Goldberg**

Written by the cofounders of SharpBrains, the *Guide* contains seven meticulously researched and fully annotated chapters that provide a concise overview of the four pillars of lifelong brain maintenance and a perspective on the growing field of brain fitness. The *Guide* reviews the most current evidence behind a number of products that make brain fitness and brain training claims, so that consumers may make informed decisions. The book also speaks to both professionals and lifelong learners about emerging trends and forecasts of the future.

***Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School* (Seattle, Wash.: Pear Press, 2008) by John Medina**

Dr. John Medina, molecular biologist and director of the Brain Center for Applied Learning Research at Seattle Pacific University, Wash., writes an engaging, comprehensive introduction to the many daily implications of recent brain research.

***The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York, N.Y.: Viking Adult, 2007) by Norman Doidge**

Dr. Norman Doidge, psychiatrist and author of this *New York Times* bestseller, brings us “a compelling collection of tales about the amazing abilities of the brain to rewire, readjust and relearn.”

***A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain* (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon, 2001) by John J. Ratey**

Dr. John Ratey offers a stimulating description of how the brain works. This is an excellent “brain 101” book for those new to the brain fitness field.

Please visit <http://www.sharpbrains.com/resources/books/> for an additional reading list. To order *The SharpBrains Guide to Brain Fitness*, go to [www.sharpbrains.com](http://www.sharpbrains.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).