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FRAMINGHAM

Senior community adopts brain health program to curb memory loss

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By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

Over 35 million people worldwide will have dementia next year, according a report released late last month; and personnel at a Framingham senior living community have often seen residents and their younger family members express ñthat fear that someday I may be in that situation,ò said the communityûs executive director Brian Beausoleil.

But seniors and staff at Summerville at Farm Pond are optimistic about a recently launched brain health program, which they hope can not only slow the loss of brain cells due to old age, but also grow new cells, to delay or prevent dementia from occurring.

ñWeûve all heard that you canût teach an old dog new tricks. Well, it turns out you certainly can,ò said Summervilleûs memory care director Steve Williams.

In 2008, through a partnership with clinical neuropsychologist and University of Pittsburgh adjunct professor Dr. Paul Nussbaum, 12 Summerville residents between age 80 and 95 participated in a six-week pilot study, which is now being implemented community-wide.

The seniors in the pilot study changed their daily activities and diets. They meditated and took Portuguese, sign language, tai chi, yoga, music, creative writing and art classes. They added more fish and vegetables to their diets and learned to use computers, the Internet and joined the social networking site, MyWayVillage, or a ñFacebook for seniors.ò

Summerville residents Judy Markovsky, 85, and K. Fleming, 84, had both recently lost their husbands prior to the pilot studyûs start, and joining the program designed to keep the mind busy could not have come at a better time.

ñI felt really good about myself,ò Fleming said. ñAll I was doing [before joining the program] was sitting in the house crying, which doesnût do you much good.ò

ñIt was wonderful. I was lucky to be asked to be in the study,ò added Markovsky. ñWe did so many things in the six-week period. It was quite a hectic time.ò

And in the midst of their busy schedules, along with increasing their knowledge of the brain and improving their quality of life, study results said their memories were improving in the process.

The 12 pilot study members were tested before the six-week program began on how well they could remember new information that had been presented to them 20 minutes ago. When the 12 were re-tested after the six weeks, their ability to remember new information presented 20 minutes earlier had improved significantly.

Nussbaum said that by keeping their brains stimulated with ñnovel and complex tasks,ò their brains grew new cells and strengthened each personûs

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