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Danbury seniors test their vigorous minds

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Mary Niemczyk, 80, reaches for the touch screen in her favorite card game at Maplewood at Danbury

DANBURY -- Patrick Brady, 88, is concentrating.

He's trying to match the words on the left side of the computer screen -- furniture, trees and food -- with their correct category on the right side -- hamburger, apple and bed.

Will Brady choose all the right answers in time? He hopes so, but if he doesn't he'll still have a great time trying.

"It's very entertaining," he said.

Brady is one of 30 seniors at Maplewood at Danbury, an assisted-living and memory-care residence on Hospital Avenue, who are participating in My Vigorous Mind, the new Web-based software program designed to stimulate the users' brains.

"Maplewood is among the first three assisted-living facilities that is using My Vigorous Mind in the country and the first one in Connecticut," said Yuval Malinsky, CEO of Vigorous Mind in Newton, Mass.

My Vigorous Mind has nine components: brain fitness, brain games, senior e-mail, albums, recollections, music, calendar, news and Web surfing.

The brain-fitness portion provides exercises that strengthen cognitive skills such as memory, language, processing speed, perception, multi-tasking and reasoning.

"One of the most important advantages of this component is that, since it's Web-based, it allows care providers to monitor residents' performance," said Mark Barwise, of Orange, Maplewood's executive director.

If caregivers notice a decline in a particular area, they can notify the resident and recommend he contact his physicians.

"From analyzing the results of these activities, we may be able to potentially detect major health concerns, such as a mini-stroke, which might not otherwise have been apparent to the resident," Barwise said.

In the brain games category, which Brady especially enjoys, players must touch the correct answers on the screen in a designated amount of time.

The difficulty levels of the games increase as the players' skills improve, so they are continuously being challenged. Results are recorded so residents can see their progress.

All the buttons on the screen are large and contain large letters. And updates are added frequently, so there is always more to learn.

My Vigorous Mind was first developed in Europe and is now in use in 400 assisted-living facilities throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

"The program was created by leading neuropsychologists and scientists in dementia and Alzheimer's disease with the goal of potentially preventing or slowing the progression of these conditions," Malinsky said.

Stimulating the brain on a regular basis can also help in the recovery from a stroke or traumatic brain injury, he said.

The U.S. version of the program was developed less than a year ago. Staff members from Vigorous Mind, along with the Northbridge Companies of Burlington, Mass., came to Maplewood to install the program and train staff members to use it.

In the secure senior e-mail, residents receive messages that are accompanied by a picture of the person who is communicating with them, which serves to strengthen their memory by associating faces with names.

The electronic photo album application enables seniors to stay connected with friends and family members by receiving pictures from them of special people or events. This fosters social interaction, since residents can share the pictures with one another and exchange stories about them.

According to Malinsky, My Vigorous Mind is designed for use by anyone age 45 and over, with the majority of users being 60 and over.

"Baby boomers are now entering retirement age and are always looking for ways for their minds to stay sharp," he said. "It's important for anyone at any age to regularly stimulate their brains."

This can be done on an everyday basis at home by reading, memorizing dance steps, learning new languages, playing musical instruments and socializing.

Having a healthy diet, finding ways to reduce stress, participating in regular physical exercise and getting enough sleep are also essential to brain wellness, he said.

Maplewood's residents have access to My Vigorous Mind 'round the clock every day, and more of them are being introduced to the program all the time. They really seem to love it, Barwise said.

"Until I started playing these games last month, I had never used a computer before in my life," said Mary Niemczyk, 80, who now plays the "word jumble" recall game for two hours every day, trying to beat her top score.

"It's really enjoyable and it helps keep my brain active."

For more information on My Vigorous Mind software, call 1 (888) 769-6463 or visit vigorousmind.com.