

Attainment's

Thinking Cards

**Stimulating Activities
for Older Adults with
Mild Cognitive Impairment**

**100 Exercises
and Memory Tips
to Keep Your
Mind Active**



Authors: Marge Engleman, Ph.D.

Danielle Luethje, MSSW,
Alzheimer's Association-South Central Wisconsin Chapter

Gail Petersen, Ph.D.

Kim Petersen, M.D.



Card Design: Jo Reynolds
Booklet Design: Sherry Pribbenow

An Attainment Publication



©2005 Attainment Company, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Who Are These Cards For?	5
How Can These Cards Be Used?	6
Other Ideas for Keeping the Brain Active	7
Understanding and Coping With Memory Problems	8
Memory Tips	13
Other Coping Tips	19
Suggestions for Group Leaders	22
Materials	24
Card List	25
Helpful Resources	30
Notes	31

Introduction

Many of you have probably heard or read about the importance of keeping the mind active as we age. It's important to know that stimulating the brain and keeping mentally active is just as critical when you or a family member has been diagnosed with a memory impairment or other cognitive disorder. Because no two people have exactly the same symptoms, it would be impossible to develop a set of exercises that will be useful for everyone.

Therefore, we have included a variety of exercises knowing you will pick and choose the ones best for you. Find those you enjoy doing, but don't necessarily avoid all of the challenging exercises. It is okay to stretch your brain cells a bit, but know that if an exercise causes you to become too frustrated or overwhelmed, then it's probably not a good one for you. It's good to stimulate the brain, but not over-stimulate it. Don't fret over exercises that you decide to skip. Everyone has different strengths. Focus on ones you find engaging and fun!

Who Are These Cards For?

These cards are for people with mild cognitive impairment and early Alzheimer's disease or a related disorder. They could also be used with support by some people in the middle stages, but are not designed for these in the later stages of a dementing illness.

There is no research to show that these exercises will slow or stop the progression of Alzheimer's disease or dementia. However, the purpose of these cards is to help keep your mind stimulated and to strengthen the skills that you have. You may need help with some of the exercises. That's okay. The important thing is to keep your brain stimulated and have fun!



How Can These Cards Be Used?

- Find the cards that you want to use and do them one at a time, repeating the exercises whenever you choose.
- Do these exercises with your spouse, adult children, or other relatives and friends. You could even do some with your grandchildren.
- Use exercises in a group setting, to spark discussion or as planned activity.
- Activity directors can select exercises to use in their programs.
- Use the photographs on the card back to stimulate discussion.



Other Ideas for Keeping the Brain Active

In addition to these exercises, there are many other things you can do to keep the mind active:

- ▣ Read newspapers, books, magazines
- ▣ Write letters, stories, poetry, family history
- ▣ Keep a diary or journal
- ▣ Play cards or other board games
- ▣ Play word games such as crossword puzzles or word search
- ▣ Sing, whistle, dance
- ▣ Do art projects
- ▣ Become a bird-watcher
- ▣ Maintain relationships with friends and family
- ▣ Be involved in social activities



Understanding and Coping with Memory Problems

Brain Dysfunction: Impact on Thinking, Function and Behavior

The following areas of the brain may be damaged when a person has Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia:

Hippocampus: Short Term Memory

The hippocampus is the seat of our short-term memory system. Every bit of information that our senses send to our brain first goes into the hippocampus, where it's sorted out and sent to long-term storage areas in the brain. The hippocampus is the first area of the brain to be damaged with Alzheimer's disease; when it malfunctions, it is like a tape recorder that erases itself. The "data" that goes into the hippocampus is not sent to long-term storage and is lost in a few moments, as if the information never existed. Thus, a person with Alzheimer's disease might not remember asking or getting an answer to a question, telling a story, an appointment time, how to run a new microwave, etc.

Damage in the hippocampus makes it difficult for persons with Alzheimer's disease to learn new things or retain short-term memories. Long-term memories, such as one's first job, raising children, growing up, etc. are generally well preserved. Oftentimes, long-term memories become very important and vivid for a person with a memory disorder, because the short-term memory doesn't function well. Thus reminiscing about "the old days" is often an enjoyable activity.

Temporal Lobe: Word Finding

The temporal lobe is where our "dictionary" is stored. The front part of the brain, or the frontal lobe, decides what it wants to say and then sends messages to the temporal lobe to find the words to express the thought. When a person has Alzheimer's disease, the brain damage generally moves from the hippocampus to the temporal lobe. This causes word-finding difficulty. People who have had strokes may also have difficulty with word-finding. A person may not be able to think of the name of a common item, such as a cup, but can tell you what it is used for, where it is stored, etc.

When someone is struggling to find a word, sometimes it helps to provide a couple of plausible

suggestions. If these aren't helpful, assist the person to "move on" and "let it go." The harder we try to remember something, the more difficult it becomes. (It is common, however, for all of us to have trouble remembering people's names. This is not necessarily a sign of a memory disorder.)

Parietal Lobe: Numbers, Dates, Way-Finding, Visual-Spatial Skills

The parietal lobe is often affected by Alzheimer's and other thinking disorders. The parietal lobe of the brain is responsible for helping us to work with numbers, put things into patterns, know the date, find our way, read a map, and do visual-spatial tasks like learning what buttons to push on a new television remote-control. People with disorders such as Alzheimer's disease often have trouble knowing the day, date or time. They can also become lost in both unfamiliar and familiar places. Someone who has always enjoyed doing hand crafts or woodworking may find it more difficult to follow a pattern or use tools.

Frontal Lobe: Judgment and Planning Ability

The frontal lobe of the brain is often affected by thinking disorders. Our frontal lobe is responsible for executive function, which includes making a plan and carrying it out, weighing the evidence

and making a good decision, initiating an activity, knowing what is appropriate to say in a social situation. The frontal lobe is often considered the “seat of our personality.” A person with frontal lobe damage may become apathetic and just sit much of the day. Sometimes, people with frontal lobe damage from Alzheimer’s disease may “forget that they have forgotten,” and deny that they have a memory problem. Sometimes frontal lobe damage can be expressed as irritability and lack of social skills. People with frontal lobe impairment may be vulnerable to unscrupulous solicitors or may buy thousands of dollars of merchandise to try to win a sweepstakes.

Amygdala: Emotional Brain

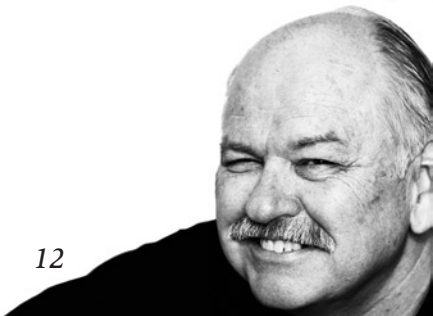
The amygdala is a primitive part of the brain that “never sleeps.” It is part of our “emotional brain” and is always alert to sense danger and react quickly to protect us. If you have ever had a small child dart out in front of the car, your amygdala reacted and caused you to slam on the brakes even before your conscious brain was aware of the danger. The amygdala also gives our life its emotional content — joy, sadness, anger, etc. Because the amygdala is located next to the hippocampus, it’s often damaged by Alzheimer’s disease. When the amygdala is not functioning

properly, a person may become agitated or angry over the smallest incident.

Pre-Frontal Cortex

Located between the “emotional brain” and the “reasoning” frontal part of the brain, the pre-frontal cortex acts as a “damper switch” for the amygdala. The pre-frontal cortex “slows down” the immediate, strong emotional reaction which the amygdala sets up and allows our reasoning ability to decide whether our first reaction is socially appropriate. When you see a two-year old child have a tantrum in the check-out aisle at the grocery store because his mother won’t buy him candy, you see an instance when the pre-frontal cortex is not developed yet. The child doesn’t realize that kicking and screaming on the floor is not the acceptable response to having a wish denied. When a person has Alzheimer’s disease or other memory disorder, often the pre-frontal cortex is damaged, and the amygdala sometimes seems to “free-wheel without any brakes.”

© ElderAdvocates, Inc. 2000



Memory Tips

- ▣ **Maintain a daily routine** (e.g., get up and go to bed at the same time daily; eat meals at the same time daily).
- ▣ **Use notes** in a consistent manner (e.g., only put notes on a calendar or a refrigerator).
- ▣ **Carry identification** with you at all times.
- ▣ **Place a short list of emergency numbers** near phone.
- ▣ **Place a short list of steps** on how to use your appliances near each. (e.g., stove).
- ▣ **Keep your keys** in the same spot.
- ▣ **Always keep your wallet** in the same pocket.
- ▣ **Feel free** to let others know you have memory loss.
- ▣ **Keep a calendar** in the room you most frequently use.
- ▣ **Utilize a clock** with day, date, and time.
- ▣ **Do not drive** if you are feeling confused.
- ▣ **Ask people their names** if you forget them.
- ▣ **Use word association** whenever you can.

- ▣ **Have a “navigator”** especially when you go to unfamiliar places, to help you find your way around.
- ▣ **Have your vision and hearing checked** annually.
- ▣ **Trust your family** to help you pay bills and make decisions.
- ▣ **Ask questions** about things you may not understand.
- ▣ **Let go of things that cause you to feel anxious** (e.g., don't dwell on looking for a lost item).

Tips for Keeping a Schedule:

- ▣ It's helpful to write all your appointments on one calendar that you always keep in the same location. Make a habit of referring to the calendar at the same time each day, like when having morning coffee. At the end of each day, cross it off before going to bed.
- ▣ Use a digital clock that displays day, date, time and temperature. This type of clock can be found at hardware or department stores.

- Ask a relative or friend to help you remember the date and time of your appointments. Knowing that someone will remind you about them can be very reassuring.

Tips for Keeping Your Home in Order:

- The old adage “a place for everything and everything in its place” is wise advice. Make a habit of keeping things like keys, wallet, etc., in one place. This ensures that we don’t “overload” our memory system.
- Keep the home free from clutter, which can be distracting and confusing. For example, when the mail comes, sort out the junk and throw it away immediately so it doesn’t become overwhelming.
- Label drawers and shelves to make it more convenient to find things.
- A quiet, calm and organized environment is prudent.
- Good lighting in all areas, including stairs and hallways, is essential.



Tips for Operating Equipment Successfully:

- If you are learning something new like how to use a new appliance, it may help to write down the steps sequentially. For the first few times, check off each step when it's completed, then go on to the next step.
- Purchase simple remote controls for the television and VCR and DVD players that have large, clearly labeled buttons.
- If you use the automatic dial function on your telephone, keep a list of the names and their numbers permanently posted by the phone.

Tips for Finding the Right Word:

- If you are having trouble remembering a word or name, perhaps the person with whom you're speaking can give you one or two plausible suggestions. If this isn't the word you are searching for, "let it go" and move on. Often, the harder we try to remember something, the harder it becomes to do so.
- If you block on someone's name, have a comment ready, such as "Your name is stuck on the tip of my tongue—can you help loosen it?" Remember, all of us have trouble with names from time to time.

Tips to Help Short-Term Memory:

- ☐ Sometimes your short-term memory may erase, making it impossible for you to remember what's happened, an appointment you'd made, or something someone's said to you. This can be disconcerting, but there are ways to reduce the frustration. Structure your world so you don't have to rely exclusively on your short-term memory.
- ☐ Write notes to remember things. Be sure to throw them out when they're out-of-date.
- ☐ Develop a consistent, unvarying routine with the same schedule each day.
- ☐ Break down a complex task into single steps. Finish each step before you do the next one.
- ☐ If a project becomes frustrating, set it aside and pick it up again later.
- ☐ Simplify. Having too many things going on at once or too much sensory stimulation can be confusing and frustrating.
- ☐ Keep a daybook or scrapbook to record visits from friends, special outings, interesting news items, etc. Page through it and recall pleasurable moments from the recent past.

Tips for Maximizing Your Cognitive Strengths:

- ▣ Music enriches, soothes the soul and improves brain function. Play your favorite music CDs or tapes. Go to concerts, dances and recitals. Listen to quiet, soothing music if you have difficulty going to sleep.
- ▣ Do active hobbies like water aerobics, yoga, tai chi, or walking. Exercise improves mood and sleep.
- ▣ An active social life is vital for maintaining good cognition. Attend activities at a Senior Center, church or club.
- ▣ Play cards with friends. If this becomes frustrating, explain that you don't enjoy playing cards anymore. Instead, join the group for socializing afterward.
- ▣ Do hobbies like sewing, woodworking, gardening, quilting or crocheting. Learning something new or tackling a difficult project helps the brain create new connections, which is very therapeutic.

- Keep a journal of reminiscences; you have many fascinating stories to tell. The journal or tape recording makes a treasured gift for family members.
- Be mindful of becoming too tired or stressed. Fatigue and stress can have a very detrimental effect on cognition. Some days or times of day may be better than others for doing projects. Focus on the enjoyment of the project, not the finished product.

Other Coping Tips

Limit Use of Brain Altering Drugs:

- Two or more alcoholic drinks per day can impair memory, and also may interact negatively with medications.
- Alcohol causes headaches, insomnia, and affects emotions.
- Smoking impacts on lungs, affecting the oxygen level to the brain.



Minimize Medications:

- ☐ Work with your physician to find the minimum effective level for your medication dosage.
- ☐ Use a pill reminder box.
- ☐ Do not stop taking a medication without discussing it with your physician.

Eat Well:

- ☐ Include fresh fruits and vegetables, calcium, and protein.
- ☐ Reduce fats and refined sugars.
- ☐ Consider taking a daily vitamin with iron, if you can tolerate it.

Exercise:

- ▣ Increases circulation. This gets more blood and oxygen and glucose to your brain thereby improving memory.
- ▣ Getting outdoors in the sun can be helpful.
- ▣ Exercise in the house if you can't go outside.
- ▣ Before you begin any exercise program, get your physician's approval.

Laugh and Smile:

- ▣ Maintain a healthy sense of humor.
- ▣ Stay happy.
- ▣ You have control over your stress — don't give in to it.



Suggestions for Group Leaders

It's important to encourage the members of the group to have fun with these activities, while discouraging competition or feelings of inadequacy. You might begin a session like this:

"Today we're going to try a number of activities which are designed to be fun, as well as to challenge your brain. All of us have things that we do well and other things that are more difficult for us to do. If it seems difficult or frustrating, it's fine to sit back and enjoy other people's responses.

To Begin:

Read the directions on the card and demonstrate the activity, if appropriate. If people are having difficulty understanding the directions, break them down into smaller pieces. For example, with the activity "Momilies" you might say:

- Do you remember any things that your mother often said to you? (Pause and give people time to think).
- For example, she might have said, *"I'm doing this for your own good."* Or perhaps she said, *"Don't run with a sucker in your mouth."* When you got a mosquito bite, perhaps she said, *"The more you scratch it, the more it will itch."*

- Do any of these sayings sound familiar?
(Look for affirmative responses or give some examples).
- Do you remember any saying that your mother (or father) used? Give people time to think and respond.
- Do you remember any sayings that you passed on to your children? Again, give people time to respond.

Watch carefully and see if the group is engaged in the activity. If more than half of the participants appear not to be interested, try another activity.



Materials

As you select activities for a session, gather the appropriate materials. Many activities don't require any supplies; those that do use simple, commonplace materials:

- Some activities need paper and writing implements. For example, the Timeline activity uses a roll of freezer paper, cut into long sheets for each participant.
- Several activities call for music, so you will need records, tapes or CDs plus audio equipment.
- A few activities call for old newspapers, catalogs and magazines plus glue sticks.

Card List

1. Who Are These Cards For?
2. How to Use These Cards
3. Ideas for Keeping the Brain Active
4. Helpful Resources
5. Breathe, Breathe, Breathe
6. New and Different
7. Revisit a Skill from the Past
8. Enhancing TV Watching
9. Have a Dream
10. Games Make Brains
11. Fold Your Hands
12. Proverbs
13. Alphabet Stretch
14. Momilies
15. Read Aloud
16. Words that Go Together
17. Guggenheim
18. Finding All the S's
19. Alphabet Words
20. Tongue Twisters
21. Memory and Music
22. Time Line
23. Trees

-
24. Story Problems
 25. Addition & Subtraction
 26. Measuring Up
 27. Brainstorming
 28. Brainstorming — Solving Real Life Problems
 29. What If . . .
 30. Important Events in History
 31. A Time Box
 32. Favorite Places
 33. Was My Face Red!
 34. I've Learned That . . .
 35. Schoolyard Games
 36. The Dating Game
 37. Let There Be Music
 38. Use Your Nose
 39. Immigration Stories
 40. Rites of Passage
 41. Laughter is the Best Medicine
 42. Make a Funny File
 43. The Work World
 44. Memorable Moments
 45. You Can Always Talk About the Weather
 46. Glad Rags



-
47. First Time Stories
 48. Yearbooks: The More Things Change,
the More They Stay the Same
 49. Party Planning
 50. Fluent Thinking – Listing
 51. Imagination and a Dot
 52. If You Were . . .
 53. Seven Things Game
 54. Creativity and Doodling
 55. Drawing and Sketching
 56. Tree People
 57. Rooms in Your Childhood Home
 58. Cut It Out
 59. Jigsaw Puzzle
 60. Brainstorming — New Uses
 61. Paper Clips
 62. Challenging the Left Brain
 63. Pet Peeves
 64. Imagining
 65. The Invisible
 66. What to Look for in Works of Art
 67. Really Seeing
 68. What's in Your Hand?



-
69. Draw What You Hear
 70. Rhymes and Riddles
 71. Describe What You Smell
 72. Scent Associations
 73. Tips for Keeping a Schedule
 74. Tips for Keeping Your Home in Order
 75. Tips for Operating Equipment Successfully
 76. Tips for Finding the Right Word
 77. Tips to Help with Short-term Memory
 78. Tips for Maximizing Your Cognitive Strengths
 79. Once Upon a Time
 80. Family History
 81. Games We Used to Play
 82. Remembering Songs from the Past
 83. Early Radio Programs
 84. Relax . . .
 85. Maintaining Spiritual Connections & Traditions

-
86. Physical Health Enhances Mental Health
 87. Manage Your Stress
 88. Telephone
 89. Cartoons
 90. Great American Novel
 91. What Am I Holding?
 92. What Are We Doing?
 93. Manners
 94. Accidental Poems
 95. Symbols
 96. Counting Games
 97. Growling Stomachs
 98. Making Music
 99. Music and Mood
 100. Faster and Faster



Helpful Resources

If you are having early memory problems, here are a few resources that might be helpful to you and your family:

Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Association **1-800-272-3900 or www.alz.org**

This organization has chapters throughout the country that provide information, support, education, and advocacy for people with Alzheimer's or related disorders and their families.

ADEAR **(Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center)** **1-800-438-4380 or www.alzheimers.org**

ADEAR maintains information on Alzheimer's disease research, diagnosis, treatment, drugs, and clinical trials plus Federal Government programs and resources.

Ageless Design **www.agelessdesign.com**

Ageless Design has a daily news service. Sign up through this web site and receive daily international news clips that report on all different up-to-date aspects of Alzheimer's disease.

Dementia Advocacy and Support Network (DASN) **www.dasninternational.org/index.html**

This web site is organized by a group of individuals around the world with Alzheimer's or related disorders. It is not professionally monitored or facilitated. You'll find essays and talks by persons with AD or other dementias plus an online chat room.

Notes



Attainment Company, Inc.

P.O. Box 930160

Verona, Wisconsin 53593-0160

Phone 800-327-4269 Fax 800.942.3865

www.AttainmentCompany.com