

School isn't just for the young

Why a lifetime of learning empowers us in our senior years

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Learning is vital for young people, but the benefits continue in our senior years. “Lifelong learning keeps the brain active and the mind, body and spirit engaged,” explains Karen Hatch, LivingWell coach at Delmanor retirement communities. “Learning gives us a purpose and helps keep us active and sharp so our brains don't go stagnant.”

Learn something new

“Aside from the obvious brain stimulation that comes from actively seeking out new information, seniors really need to think about stepping out of their comfort zone,” says Whitney Hilts, LivingWell Manager at Delmanor Elgin Mills.

“Let's say someone is a poker player who loves to play but knows the game inside out. Learn how to play bridge,” says Hatch. “Or perhaps you paint, and watercolours are your medium. Maybe you could consider acrylics – or try working with clay.”

But don't step too far out. “If you're not musically inclined, learning a musical instrument may just be frustrating and not add to the enjoyment of succeeding at something new. Make sure you can laugh at yourself when things don't go the way you had hoped or expected,” advises Hatch.

Learn what interests you

There's no point in signing up to learn a new language if it's something you're really not that interested in. At this stage of your life, you'll want learn about things that engage your interest.

Almost all the learning that takes place with seniors is something they have some previous interest in, says Hilts. “If you love music, but already know how to play the piano, what about studying opera or taking a course on the history of music? Take what you already love and branch out into new areas because it can take you to so many new places.”

Learn something relevant

“Things that may not have held your interest when you were younger may now feel relevant,” says Hilts. Often these new topics are related to wellness and

healthy living for older adults. “Mental health, diet and nutrition and physical fitness are now important, so many seniors are researching alternative diets and exercise programs. They can seek out their own information and take learning into their own hands.” Learning new technology is very relevant in today’s world. Begin with something simple. Do you have lots of photos? “Learn to transfer your pictures onto a computer and you’re getting a digital experience. That’s a great place to start,” says Hilts.

Learn what you’ve always dreamed about

Did you always want to be a writer but never learned the basics? Maybe you always wished you had studied yoga or learned to play the guitar. “Your chance of success is good because it’s already a passion,” says Hatch.

Is it too late to learn something new?

Many seniors pull back because they feel it’s too late to start learning a new skill or acquire new information. Not so, says Hilts. “Anyone can continue to learn, even if they have memory challenges. Perhaps they have trouble storing new information, but they will still get something out of a learning experience.”

“Lifelong learning helps keep us relevant, mentally sharp and young in mind and body,” adds Hatch.