

November 2020 Speaker
Stacy Costa
Puzzles Benefit The Brain

“Puzzles hugely benefit brain health. They cultivate thinking skills, improve memory, relieve emotional stress, help us problem solve in our lives and bring families together,” Stacy Costa enthusiastically and convincingly told us. Stacy is an expert on the subject. She is one of the few female enigmatologists, the official term for someone who studies and creates puzzles. She has accomplished a lot for somebody so young. She has designed puzzles for business and government, lectured, organized courses and is working on her Ph.D in curriculum studies. Her primary field of interest is how puzzles can improve brain function.

Puzzle sales have zoomed during the covid-19 crisis, she noted. “Every minute twenty puzzles are sold worldwide. There are many explanations. They aren’t so costly and appeal to universally shared characteristics of creativity, playfulness and interest in problem solving. They appeal across time and cultures. In a time of chaos they provide a sense of creative order.”

She pointed out that puzzles benefit the brain all the time, not only in crises like covid. “They are as important as eating, drinking and sleeping.”

She was seeking to make us converts. When she asked how many of the 106 members listening to her talk do puzzles only 30 percent said daily; 24 percent, never and the rest in between. A member, however, pointed out that “All of life is problem solving.” Stacy agreed, pointing out that the brain can be stimulated by something as simple as taking different routes to the grocery store. “It forces the brain to work when you don’t do the same thing all the time. Bridge, which many of you play, is a form of puzzle.”

She is concentrating on how puzzles can help slow deterioration of the brain during aging. “People are living much longer. Puzzles help prevent the brain deteriorating faster than the body. Any type of puzzle can help make the brain years younger than it actually is.” The Alzheimer’s Disease and Stroke Associations both advocate their use. They also help repair brain injuries. The belief is ‘Use it or lose it.’” However, she cautioned that “I can’t say that puzzles will prevent Alzheimer’s.”

It takes her 20-45 hours to create a crossword. She has to take into account difficulty, relevancy, target group and not to use words that might be construed as offensive. There are “thousands” of puzzles. In our group 33 percent prefer jigsaws; 27 percent crosswords. She favours sudokus. “With jigsaws, twice the number of pieces doesn’t mean it takes double the time to do. Rather, it takes quadruple the time,” she noted.

Her advice: Choose challenging puzzles, not easy ones. Spend 30 minutes a day on average. If longer, take breaks every 15-20 minutes to give the brain a break, especially if you’re stuck. It’s ok to use a dictionary, but not all the time. Use a pen that can erase. “Some people dismiss puzzles as a waste of time. That’s not so; they are hugely beneficial,” she said.

Susan Goldenberg