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Alzheimer's Whisperer: Take yourself, or a loved one, on a joy ride

'Joy riding' isn't just for teenagers, it's an easy way to engage the senses for those with dementia



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Joy riding.

Who said it was just for the young?

When we think of joy riding, the sounds of music, hair in the wind, and the freedom to dream comes to mind; none of which should be limited to the young. In fact, I suggest joy riding is not just for the young but may actually help us stay young.

Dementia, Alzheimer's, and most cognitive disorders are most often the result of weakened neuron connections, affected in part by age, genetics, lifestyles, injuries and many factors that are constantly under research.

But simple observations (and research) have taught us that exercise involving both the brain and the body, can positively delay some of, or the rate of, the decline. So now let's talk about joy riding.

I will take myself back to my own younger days spent in the Palos Verdes Peninsula and surrounding beaches.



Afterwards, we'd get something to eat with no previous plan of time or destination. That was part of the joy. It would depend on whether we chose to stay longer drawing on the sand or if the ocean winds became too chilly.

I recall often going back to the protection of my car and simply opening the windows to control as much or as little wind as I wanted.

It was not long ago that I could not contain my excitement at finding a new location for one of my fast-food guilty pleasures. It was the result of a wrong turn and something that would not have occurred if I wasn't "cruising."

But more importantly, the discovery became less about the pleasure of their menu and more about the acknowledgement that if I venture enough, I may have the opportunity to discover something new every day.

We all experience joys and new discoveries in different ways.

Drawing pictures in the sand may not be for everyone. At every age there is pleasure and new sensory experiences when we allow ourselves to be mindful of surroundings, new sites, tastes, smells, sounds and touch.

With my clients and their families we talk often about how sensory stimulation exercises can help form new brain connections that use the five senses. But these exercises do not (and should not) be limited to "therapy time;" they should be a time of pure enjoyment.

Whether you choose to joy ride in a car or walk down the block from your home, I encourage you to allow a space for new experiences that take advantage of all the benefits brought on by sound, taste, smells, tact and sight.

Joy riding is about taking on new experiences with freedom, playfulness and finding pleasure in the surprises. Brain connectivity is about doing all those things with the necessary mindfulness that turns the new experiences into a brain workout. And brain workouts are good.

Here are some recommendations:

- Take a walk or drive that beyond the standard path: truly observe and even savor the sites of the streets, lawns, trees, shade and sun areas, crowds and quiet
- Consider turning on music and experience how different styles or rhythms change your mood or pace as you observe your surrounding
- Take note of your observations to be able to share them later in a conversation
- Be open to everything new. Ask questions of others. Push yourself to create relationships between thoughts and what you see (this may include bill boards, construction styles, driveway locations, etc. etc.)
- Go back to a phone, computer, or paper map to trace your travels and plan your path for your next outing
- Rejoice in the playfulness by stopping at your favorite fast food restaurant, stopping for an ice cream cone, or buying a pastry to take home
- Find pleasure in simply acknowledging that you allowed yourself to try something new

Remember that joy riding implies freedom; there is no rush. It is about the moment and its sensations. Be mindful and let each of your senses find pleasure.

As mentioned earlier, the process of aging is under constant research. I encourage you to be your own researcher and challenge your mind, your body, your spirit and your opportunities of sharing conversations with others by never limiting new experiences that can stimulate brain connectivity while bringing joy to your day.

Lauren Mahakian is a certified dementia practitioner, care manager, speaker and author, support group facilitator and podcaster. Learn more at FamilyConnectMemoryCare.com.

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Lisa Jacobs is the Editor/General Manager for The Beach Reporter and the Palos Verdes Peninsula News. Since 2009, she has been building trust with readers through community news. Prior to that, she worked in the technology sector, authoring books on Microsoft applications. Lisa has a master's degree from USC in digital/social media and a bachelor's degree from University of Michigan in English/Journalism.

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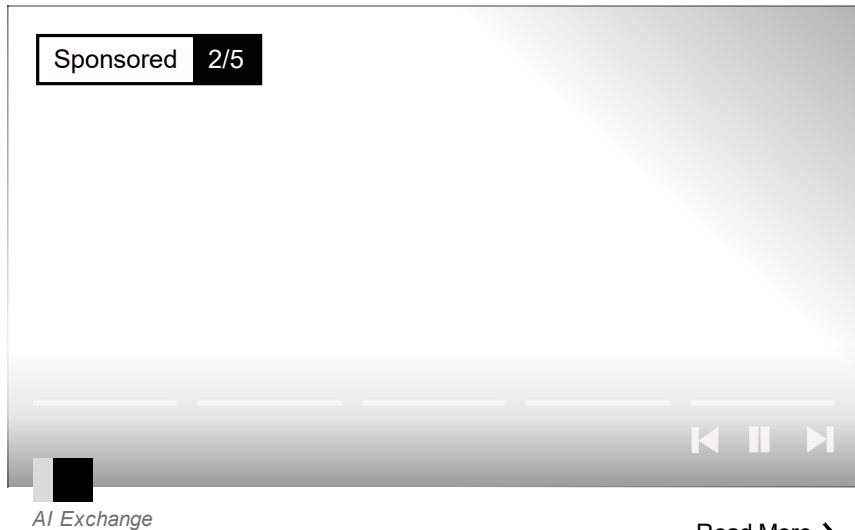
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