

Pivoting cognitive health resources for older American adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: AARP Staying Sharp as a case study

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new barriers for the delivery of healthcare resources and information, as well as in-person delivery of health care, caregiving and social engagement. This global emergency shifting focus from long term health outcomes to immediate social distancing, masks, and lock-downs necessitated a major shift in how people access both human interaction and healthcare information. Social distancing was a major lifestyle shift for those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, including older populations.

AARP's Staying Sharp program is a digital platform dedicated to educating AARP members on how to learn, practice, and apply holistic, lifestyle-based behaviors that may impact cognitive aging. The Staying Sharp program has been active for several years, and currently has a userbase of over 1 million members.

In response to COVID-19, Staying Sharp pivoted in several ways in order to best serve our members as a valuable health education tool. Here, with a focus on Staying Sharp as a case study, we will provide lessons learned from the transition to virtual-based public health education and virtual-based social interaction aimed at mitigating the potential neurocognitive and psychological harms of COVID-related stress and social isolation.

Method

This dramatic shift necessitated a new approach focused on addressing an older, physically-isolated population, with particular focus on supporting aspects of brain health. Staying Sharp engaged a targeted approach to virtual brain health education resources, within the context of a global pandemic crisis and mandated social distancing measures.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, AARP's Staying Sharp team focused on addressing, head-on, the immediate implications of life in pandemic, with an emphasis on recommendations based on the most current updates in COVID-19 science. Leveraging Staying Sharp's unique position in the space of cognitive aging with lifestyle-based approaches to neurological and psychological health, the team focused on addressing the concerns and needs of consumers where they were – both physically and mentally – in their quest to stay healthy during this global health crisis.

In April 2020, Staying Sharp rapidly launched a comprehensive virtual module called *Brain Healthy Staycation* (Figure 1). The strategy behind Brain Healthy Staycation was to provide a toolbox of information and resources guiding consumers through the pandemic, with primary focus on building and maintaining a healthy lifestyle through six pillars of brain health: (1) Exercise, (2) Nutrition, (3) Sleep hygiene, (4) Stress management, (5) Social connectedness, and (6) Intellectual stimulation.

Through multimedia content, the program acknowledged the challenging experience of living as a 50+ adult coping with the “new reality” of COVID-19 and its impact on daily life, as individuals faced an uncertain, socially distant, and - in some cases - entirely isolated existence at home. The focus of *Staycation* was to provide information and activities to support cognitive health while supporting the psychological and emotional wellness of our userbase. Beyond a focus on lifestyle, Staycation also provided resources about (1) understanding where to find reliable sources regarding information about the pandemic, as well as (2) methods to stay cognitively active and socially engaged while maintaining pandemic-necessitated physical distancing.

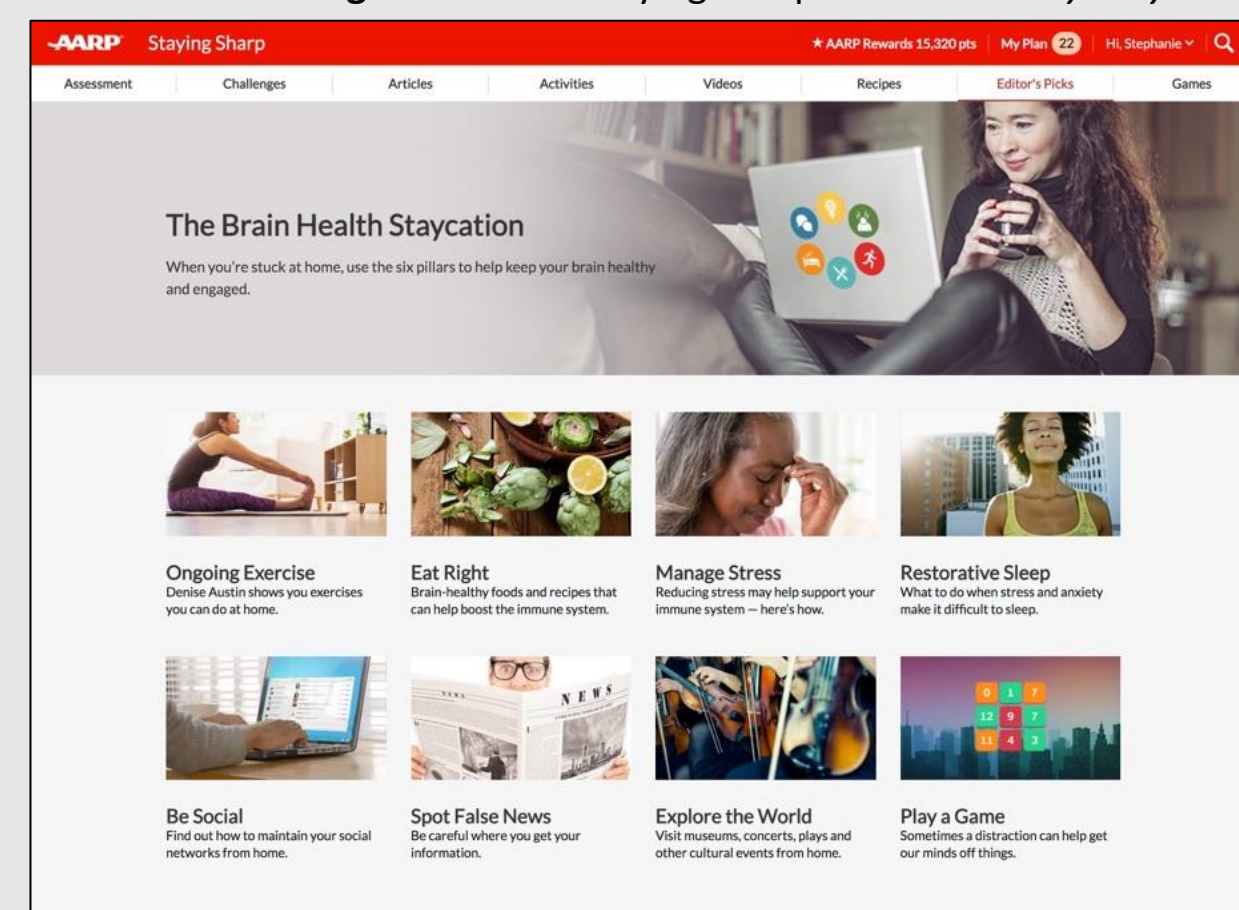
Nutrition: As the pandemic shifted and consumers accepted the likelihood of a longer-term quarantine, focus shifted to nutrition, reflecting a cultural trend across the US of creative, at-home cooking and baking. This was also paired with health-through-nutrition education resources and relatable, actionable tips. A Q&A video was developed to address the many questions consumers had regarding ways to shop safely, food storage methods, and ways to ensure food safety. Hundreds of recipes were included to provide simple, healthy ways to prepare foods – intended to nurture both brain and body, and to provide our consumers with a much-needed creative outlet.

Mindfulness: *Find Your Calm* and *Building Resilience* – two separate offerings - were developed to address the growing frustration and anxiety amongst Americans weary from prolonged isolation. With *Find Your Calm*, the strategy was to provide an outlet for those overwhelmed by stress. Users were taken through the basics of mindfulness and meditation via a guided video demonstration. Multimedia content taught yoga poses, and a suite of mindfulness meditations offered users moments of calm and reflection. *Building Resilience* addressed our members' fatigue with the pandemic, and introduced strategies to find resilience amidst extreme, prolonged global and personal stress. Science-based perspectives on optimism, bouncing back from trauma, addressing negative thinking, and finding solace in nature and creative pursuits were shared via both video and written content.

Each of Staying Sharp's content packages used a portfolio of creative tools to engage users. Videos provided inspiration and ideas through relatable human stories. Various exercises, ranging from meditations to physical exercises, provided a way to apply learned principles.

User focus and feedback: Two key elements provided allowed readers to see themselves in the content: (1) The use of personal stories allowed users to see how others approached the topic, and provided a note of inspiration; and, (2) user polls were incorporated into each pandemic-related module in order to gauge consumer sentiment, and to provide a feedback loop around possible areas of interest. The use of story-telling provided users with real life examples to both guide and find inspiration during stressful times. In one piece of story-telling, an essayist wrote a compelling piece entitled “How I've Managed the Pandemic.” The piece was one writer's experience of lessons learned and the life she experienced during the pandemic. The Staying Sharp team then asked readers to write in and share their stories. Several users shared poignant stories not only of how they survived the social isolation related to the pandemic, but how they survived COVID and its after-effects. User polls were incorporated into each pandemic-related modules in order to gauge consumer sentiment, and to provide a feedback loop around possible areas of interest.

Figure 1. AARP Staying Sharp's *Brain Healthy Staycation*.



Results

Pandemic-related polls gave us insight into the “new reality” of our 50+ userbase. To date, more than 21,000 responses to pandemic-related module polls have been received (Fig. 2, below).

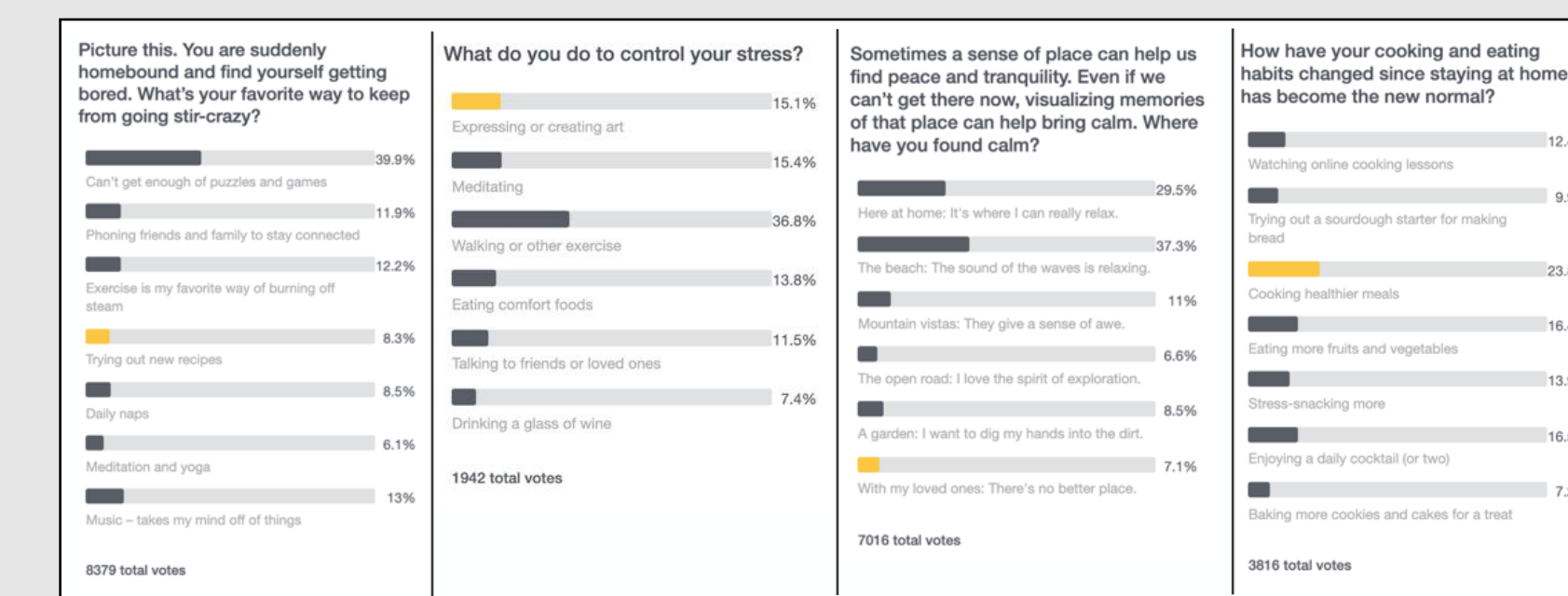


Figure 2. Pandemic-related module poll results from Staying Sharp.

The majority of poll respondents indicated that their favorite way to avoid boredom was by engaging with puzzles and games. The top-reported method for stress management, by a wide margin, was reported to be walking or other forms of exercise. Results showed a wide spectrum of cooking and eating habits formed in reaction to the pandemic: while 23.8% of respondents reported cooking healthier meals, and 16.4% reported eating more fruits and vegetables, 13.9% of respondents said they were “stress-snacking more” and 16.5% said they were “enjoying a daily cocktail (or two)”. This apparent divide in self-reported nutrition habits may warrant future investigation in order to better understand the impact of stress and isolation on healthy eating habits in the 50+ population.

Conclusion

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, AARP's Staying Sharp program pivoted in several ways to best serve our members as a valuable brain health education tool. The virtual platform was required to adapt to a new global context of extreme stress and social isolation, and to address the potential neurocognitive and psychological impact of these extraordinary conditions. COVID-related content along with other content launched during this time period contributed to all-time high engagement rates. The rapid adaptation of the Staying Sharp platform resulted in valuable lessons learned. First, the team discovered that health content creation requires constant re-examination of priorities in order to meet consumer demands. Aligning content development to major news announcements and events has the potential to bring in new users, and adds essential content to reporting on broader health issues. The ability of the platform's team to pivot and present brain health content within the context of COVID-19 provided users with an enhanced understanding of the integrated relationship between these topics, and helped clarify priorities. Second, Staying Sharp discovered - via module polls and other “customer voice” features - that providing an outlet for engagement and feedback serves two essential purposes: (1) to keep a cutting-edge pulse on consumer behaviors, and (2) to engage users more fully by allowing them to see themselves as participants in the broader discussion. To expand: The reflection of a user's personal, human experience adds relatability and adds dimension to important issues, particularly during an acutely stressful, overwhelming, long-term emergency – such as the COVID-19 pandemic.