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 health risks, masks, and hand-washing necessitated a major shift in how 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 Stay Sharp program is a digital platform dedicated to educating older Americans on how to learn, practice, and apply holistic, lifestyle-based behaviors that may impact cognitive aging. The Stay Sharp program has been active for several years, and currently has a userbase of 8 million members.

In response to COVID-19, Stay Sharp pivoted in several ways in order to best serve our members as a valuable health education tool. Here, with a focus on Stay Sharp as a case study, we will provide lessons learned from the transition to virtual-based public health education and virtual 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. Stay 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 Stay Sharp team focused on addressing, head-on, the profound implications of life in pandemic, with an emphasis on recommendations based on the most recent research and data in the field of COVID-19 science. Leveraging Stay 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 crisis.

In April 2020, Stay Sharp rapidly launched a comprehensive virtual module called Brain Healthy Staying Sharp (Figure 1). This strategy helped Brain Healthy Staying Sharp 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 Stay Sharp was to provide information and activities to support cognitive health while supporting the psychological and emotional wellness of our users. Beyond a focus on healthy lifestyle, Stay Sharp also provided resources about (1) understanding where to find reliable sources regarding information about the pandemic, and (2) methods to stay cognitively active and socially engaged while maintaining pandemic-necessitated physical distancing.

Nutrition: As the pandemic shifted and consumers practiced the balance between short-term and long-term diets, rice-focused strategy was introduced to reduce stress and maintain mental health. Reflecting the global health crisis across the US, of creative, at-home cooking is vital. This was also aligned with health-through-nutrition education resources and reliable, actionable tips. A Q&A video was developed to address this many questions consumers had regarding ways to stay safe, food storage methods, and ways to ensure food safety. Hundreds of recipes were included to provide simple, healthy ways to prepare foods – intended to nourish both brain and body, and to provide our consumers with a much-needed creative outlet.

Mindfulness: Finding your Calm and Building Resilience – two separate offerings - were developed to address the growing frustration and anxiety amongst Americans as they experienced 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 experience. The psychoactive component of this module was to makemindfulness accessible to all people. This module, also, offered users moments of calm and reflection. Build 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 Stay Sharp’s content packages used a variety 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 context: (1) The use of personal stories allowed users to see how others approached the topic, and provided a voice of importance, 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 storytelling provided users with real life examples to both guide and find inspiration during stressful times. In one piece of storytelling, a writer took a perspective entitled “How I Beat COVID-19: The Pandemic.” The piece was one writer’s experience of lessons learned, and the life she experienced during the pandemic. The Stay Sharp team then asked readers to write in and share their experiences. Larger user accessed content stories not only 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.

Results

Pandemic-related polls have given 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).

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 variety of cooking and eating habits forming the basis on the白领 while 23.8% of respondents reported cooking healthier meals, and 10.4% reported eating more fruits and vegetables. 15.9% of respondents said they were eating more takeout than usual, and 12.0% said they were "enjoying a daily cocktail for fun." This apparent divide in self-reported nutrition habits may warrant further 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 Stay 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 the time period contributed to all-time high engagement rates. The rapid adaptation of the Stay 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, Stay 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 participate as key members in the broader discussion. 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.