

Brain Health Perspectives of Seniors in the Northeast Ohio Community

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ABSTRACT: Dementia is a brain health disorder that progressively worsens over time and currently impacts millions of individuals across the United States and the entire globe. With an increasing number of individuals being diagnosed with dementia, this study aims to understand brain health perceptions, with a specific focus on dementia related disease. To understand brain health perspectives, surveys were distributed to seniors who were 65 years or older, within the Northeast Ohio community. These paper-based surveys included multiple-choice, free-response, and Likert scale-based questions to thoroughly understand the views of seniors about brain health and dementia. All survey results were analyzed using Excel, and the results suggested that seniors in Northeast Ohio have a foundational level understanding of brain health. However, when they were questioned about dementia-related specifics regarding its prevention or if they were aware of brain health resources, it was elicited that respondents didn't have a full understanding of brain health. This study is crucial to understanding brain health perspectives of seniors in Northeast Ohio and serves as a potential avenue for further research in the brain health field within the Northeast Ohio community.

KEYWORDS: Science, Sociology, Brain Health Perspectives, Ohio, Seniors.

■ Introduction

As individuals age, they are likely to face changes in their cognitive processing skills. While some of these changes are considered a natural process of aging, some are due to the progression of dementia, a brain health disorder.¹ Dementia is a neurodegenerative brain disorder that has a profound impact on the diagnosed individual, and it is a leading cause of death in the United States.² Currently, over 7 million Americans have dementia, a statistic that will grow to 13 million by 2050.³ Apart from impacting the diagnosed individual, dementia also affects caregivers. By 2030, the financial burden for dementia-related healthcare will increase to 2 trillion dollars.⁴ While there are ongoing efforts to find a viable cure for dementia, research shows the importance of taking early action through preventive measures so individuals can preserve their brain health and prevent cognitive decline. With dementia cases projected to increase continually, it's vital to empower the community with brain health education.

Currently, however, there are support groups available for mental health awareness, but there's a paucity of resources for brain health.⁵ Added to this, there is a common misconception that brain health education is only for older adults, as forms of dementia generally impact those aged 65 and over.⁶ Nonetheless, it is imperative to clear this misconception as younger-onset dementia is becoming more prevalent worldwide.⁷

Researchers have conducted extensive literature reviews to understand individuals' knowledge of Alzheimer's Disease and dementia. Findings from such a study reported that individuals have a poor to moderate understanding of neurodegenerative disease. The lack of adequate knowledge on dementia was found to be increasingly prevalent in racial and ethnic minori-

ty groups. It was further noted that the major misconception amongst the public is that dementia is a normal part of aging. Most importantly, studies highlight the need for more advocacy and education within the community to spread awareness about such neurodegenerative disorders.⁸

Apart from conducting studies specific to neurodegenerative disease, researchers have also conducted brain health surveys to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' perspectives. A study conducted in the United Arab Emirates found that participants had a "moderate understanding of brain health."⁹ Additionally, they noticed differences between ages, where the younger generation prioritized different activities compared to older individuals. Moreover, a clear distinction was noticed between the genders. In an international study analyzing the public perception of brain health, it was noted that women often expressed more concern over developing brain disorders in comparison to men.¹⁰

While extensive studies have been conducted analyzing brain health perceptions across the United States and the globe, minimal studies have been conducted for specific regions. This study aims to elucidate the brain health views of seniors in the Northeast Ohio community. Understanding these perspectives can allow for future interventions to be executed within Northeast Ohio for seniors.

■ Methodology

A comprehensive survey was utilized to understand the brain health views of individuals across Northeast Ohio. These surveys were distributed to seniors attending the Cognitive Connections Senior Center Workshops. The survey included a range of questions, assessing the demographics of the participants and brain health-related questions to understand their

perceptions. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and written consent was obtained through hard-copy survey forms. A total of fifty-five participants were surveyed across four senior centers in Northeast Ohio. While individuals were encouraged to answer all questions on the survey, it is important to note that some seniors didn't answer all of the questions.

The brain health perceptions survey starts with questions regarding the individual's age, gender, race, and the senior center they are in while taking the survey. Following that is a written consent where participants were requested to sign a consent statement reading, "I give consent for the results from this quiz to be used in the research paper that Nandita Sri Kumar is working on. All identification information will be kept anonymous in the process."

Following these questions, the brain health survey begins with a free-response question: "What does brain health mean?" This question was utilized to understand each individual's unique perception of brain health. All responses were categorized as answers that described the brain's memory capacity, functionality, or both. The next question, "In your view, at what stage(s) of life is it important to prioritize brain health?" was asked to understand an individual's opinion on the age at which brain health should be prioritized. This question was obtained and adapted from a previous global brain health survey to suit the needs of this brain health perspectives study.¹¹ Following this, the question "Are women or men more likely to develop dementia in their lifetime?" was asked to gain deeper insight into dementia based facts that seniors knew.

The next survey question utilized a Likert scale, asking participants to choose a rating between 1 and 5. For the question, "How much do you know about how to keep your brain healthy?" participants were prompted to choose a rating, and it was adapted from a European-based brain health study.¹² For this question, 1 meant they don't know anything, and 5 meant they know a lot about the concept. This question was immediately followed by "How often do you think about brain health?" which was adapted from a previously conducted global brain health survey.¹¹ This multiple-choice question, along with the previous Likert scale question, was used to understand how much seniors in Northeast Ohio prioritized their brain health.

The next question, "Do you think you are at risk of developing dementia in the upcoming years?" was also used on a Likert scale where 1 meant they believed they had no risk, while 5 meant they had a very high risk. Next, to understand how seniors in Northeast Ohio bolster their brain health, the multiple-choice question "What do you personally do (purposefully) to maintain your brain health?" was asked. This question was adapted from a study conducted in Europe by the Life Brain Consortium.¹³ Additionally, the question "Do you think dementia is preventable?" was prompted, and respondents could choose Yes, No, and expand on their answer. Next, select all that apply: "What factors would motivate you to modify your lifestyle to improve brain health?" This question was utilized to understand if seniors were willing to change their daily habits to improve their brain wellbeing, and this question was adapted from a global brain health survey.¹¹

Finally, a series of questions was prompted to understand if respondents were aware of the different resources and research being conducted in the brain health space, and if they clearly knew what brain health was. In this set, the first question was a Likert question adapted from the Dana Foundation: "On a scale of 1 to 5, are you aware of the brain health research that is currently being conducted? (1 = I know nothing about it; 5 = I know all about it)." Following this, "To prevent cognitive decline, would you be willing to change your lifestyle if it meant that you had to refrain from certain behaviors that you may enjoy (e.g., drinking wine, etc.)?" It was asked due to wide wine consumption in the United States and its adverse impacts on brain health. This question was adapted from a study conducted in Europe by the Life Brain Consortium.¹³ The final three questions, "Do you know what brain health resources are available to you?" "Are brain health and mental health the same concept?" and "Are you aware of any tools or assessments to evaluate people's brain health?" prompted respondents to answer 'Yes' or 'No,' and they had the option to expand on their answers.

These brain health survey questions were administered to all 55 participants (ages 60-90) in this study. Additionally, the demographics of the participants were collected. In regard to gender, 85.5% identified as women while 14.5% identified as men. Also, in regard to race, 47.8% identified as White, 34.5% as African American, 9.1% as Caucasian, 1.8% as Asian, and 7.3% chose "Prefer Not to Say." All participants were pivotal in understanding the brain health perspectives of seniors in Northeast Ohio.

■ Results and Discussion

First and foremost, the seniors were asked, "What Does Brain Health Mean?" to elucidate their level of understanding. Since this was a free-response question, a variety of responses were received. These responses were categorized into three groups: Functionality, Memory, or Both. "Functionality" represented answers that mentioned the practical purpose of the brain in the body. Answers categorized under "Memory" described the brain's capacity to retain ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Finally, answers that described both the memory and functionality of the brain were categorized as "Both." Of the 29 people who answered this question, all were categorized under these three categories. Results suggest that the majority of seniors, 52%, answered that brain health means preserving the functionality of the brain, while 21% believed it meant preserving the memory capacity of the brain, and 28% believed it was a combination of both (Table 1).

Next, the seniors were asked how much they knew about brain health on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents low knowledge about brain health, while 5 represents high knowledge about brain health. For this question, about 25.5% of seniors chose that they had a moderate level (score rating of 3) of understanding (Figure 1). Although most seniors chose a rating of 3 (25.5%), a larger percentage (43.6%) chose a rating of 1 or 2, in comparison to choosing a rating of 4 or 5, which was only chosen by 30.9% of seniors. Furthermore, when asked if they regularly think about their brain health, the majority of

seniors answered Occasionally (30.9%) or Frequently (36.4%) (Figure 2). To understand how seniors take care of their brain health, the survey prompted a select all that apply question. The majority choose exercising regularly (79.2%), eating nutritious meals (88.6%), and engaging the mind with new activities (21.6%). Though there was a slightly lower percentage of those who chose getting proper sleep (67.9%) and taking care of their emotional well-being (81.6%), it is evident that seniors in Northeast Ohio have a foundational understanding of brain health (Figure 3).

However, when asked if seniors believed dementia was preventable, the majority of respondents, nearly 58.2%, responded “No” (Figure 4). Also, when asked more in-depth questions regarding dementia and brain health, it was noticed that individuals weren’t aware of the specifics regarding the topic. Though individuals agreed that it was important to prioritize brain health throughout one’s lifetime (Figure 5), the majority of seniors believed that dementia is not preventable (58.2%) (Figure 4). This clearly suggests that seniors require further education to understand that dementia and other memory loss based on neurodegenerative disease are preventable from a younger age. Additionally, when asked if men or women were more likely to develop dementia, only 30.9% chose that women were more likely to develop dementia, and the majority (58.2%) believed that men and women were equally likely to develop the disorder (Figure 6).

Moreover, seniors were surveyed on their current behaviors and how they would be willing to potentially change them. For example, they were asked, “What factor would motivate you to modify your lifestyle to improve brain health?” Seniors could choose multiple options, and nearly 67.7% would be willing to change their habits if they noticed issues with their brain health (Figure 7). Also, seniors were prompted to respond to the question, “To prevent cognitive decline, would you be willing to change your lifestyle if it meant that you had to refrain from certain behaviors that you may enjoy (e.g., drinking wine, etc.)?” Nearly 68.6% of seniors who answered this question chose “Yes,” while 29.4% chose “No” and 2.0% chose “Maybe” (Figure 8).

Additionally, it was noticed that seniors in Northeast Ohio didn’t have knowledge of the brain health resources available to them. In fact, an overwhelming majority of 86.8% responded, saying that they aren’t aware of the resources available for them to bolster their brain health (Figure 9). This was also corroborated by the question, “Are you aware of any tools/assessments to evaluate people’s brain health?” Similar to the previous survey question, nearly 85.4% of seniors responded “No” to this question (Figure 10). Also, seniors were asked whether they were aware of the brain health research currently being conducted, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating they are not aware of the current progress and 5 indicating they have full knowledge of the current brain health research. On a scale of 1 to 5, 49.1% chose a score of 1, representing that they don’t know of the current progress in the dementia research field (Figure 11).

Table 1: Respondents were asked to answer the free response question “What does brain health mean?” and a total of 29 individuals responded. Free response answers were categorized as describing the functionality of the brain, the memory capacity of the brain, or both. 52% of seniors described the functionality of brain health, 21% described the brain’s memory, and 28% described both.

"What Does Brain Health Mean?"		
Category	Count	% of Total (n=29)
Functionality	15	52%
Memory	6	21%
Memory & Functionality	8	28%

1) How much do you know about how to keep your brain healthy?

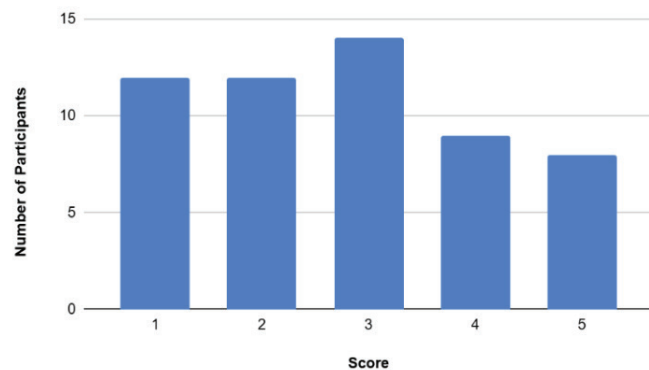


Figure 1: Respondents utilized a Likert scale between 1 and 5 to answer the question “How much do you know about how to keep your brain healthy?” Individuals were instructed to select one option, and a total of 55 individuals responded. A rating of 1 corresponds to individuals not knowing anything, and a rating of 5 corresponds to individuals knowing a lot about the concept. 21.8% chose ‘1,’ 21.8% chose ‘2,’ 25.5% chose ‘3,’ 16.4% chose ‘4,’ and 14.5% chose ‘5.’ Results suggest that seniors in Northeast Ohio have a moderate level of understanding of brain health, with more individuals having minimal knowledge about brain health.

2) How often do you think about brain health?

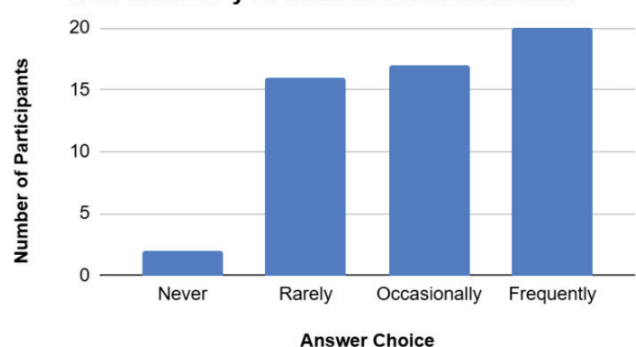


Figure 2: Respondents were prompted to answer “How often do you think about brain health?” Seniors were instructed to select one option, and a total of 55 individuals responded. Individuals had the option of choosing Never (3.6%), Rarely (29.1%), Occasionally (30.9%), or Frequently (36.4%). Seniors’ responses clearly highlight that individuals in Northeast Ohio think about the brain regularly.

3) What do you personally do (purposefully) to maintain your brain health?

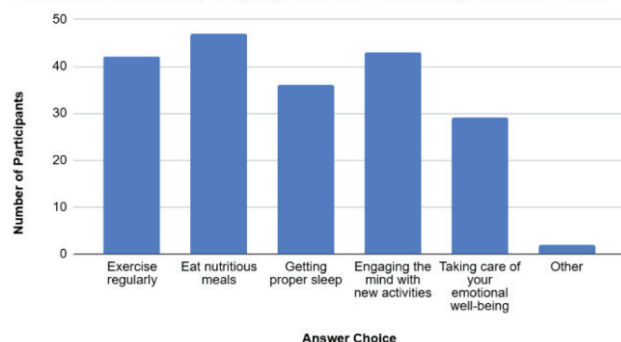


Figure 3: Respondents were prompted to answer “What do you personally do (purposefully) to maintain your brain health?” Individuals were allowed to select multiple answers, and 53 individuals responded. Individuals had the option of choosing Exercise regularly (79.2%), Eat nutritious meals (88.6%), Getting proper sleep (67.9%), Engaging the mind with new activities (21.6%), Taking care of your emotional wellbeing (81.6%), or Other (3.7%). Seniors who responded to this question seem to adequately take care of their brain health on a regular basis.

4) Do you think dementia is preventable?

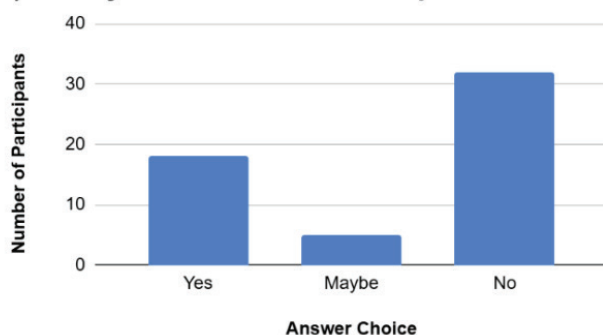


Figure 4: Seniors were prompted to answer, “Do you think dementia is preventable?” Individuals could only choose one option. A total of 55 seniors answered this question, and 32.7% chose “Yes,” 9.1% chose “Maybe,” and 58.2% chose “No.”

5) In your view, at what stages(s) of life is it important to prioritize brain health?

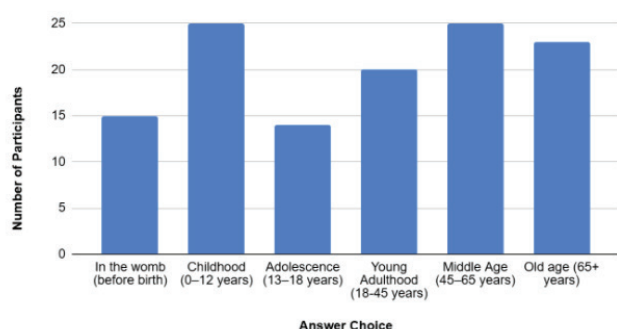


Figure 5: Respondents were prompted to answer, “In your view, at what stages(s) of life is it important to prioritize brain health?” Individuals were allowed to select multiple answers, and 54 individuals responded. Of those who answered, 27.8% chose “In the womb,” 46.3% chose “Childhood,” 25.9% chose “Adolescence,” 37.0% chose “Young Adulthood,” 46.3% chose “Middle Age,” and 42.6% chose “Old Age.” It is clear through individuals’ responses that they believe that brain health is important throughout one’s lifetime. However, it seems that seniors believe that brain health should be prioritized to a slightly lesser extent during adolescent years and prior to birth.

6) Are women or men more likely to develop dementia in their lifetime?

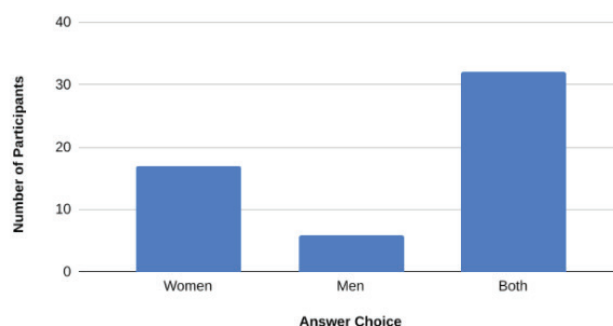


Figure 6: Respondents were asked, “Are women or men more likely to develop dementia in their lifetime?” Participants could choose one option, and a total of 55 individuals responded to this question. Individuals could choose Women (30.9%), Men (10.9%), or Both (58.2%). A large percentage of respondents believed that both men and women were equally likely to develop dementia. However, women are more likely to develop dementia, and the results from this questionnaire suggest that seniors in Northeast Ohio have limited knowledge on this aspect.

7) What factor would motivate you to modify your lifestyle to improve brain health?

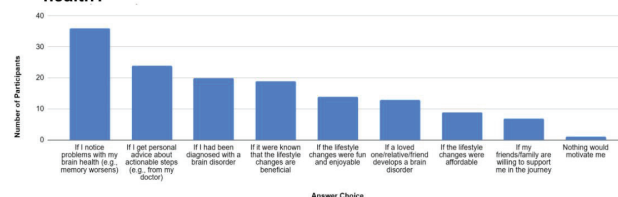


Figure 7: Participants were prompted to answer, “What factor would motivate you to modify your lifestyle to improve brain health?” Participants could choose multiple options, and a total of 54 seniors answered this question. 67.7% chose “If I notice problems with my brain health (e.g., memory worsens),” 44.4% chose “If I get personal advice about actionable steps (e.g., from my doctor),” 37.0% chose “If I had been diagnosed with a brain disorder,” 35.2% chose “If it were known that the lifestyle changes are beneficial,” 25.9% chose “If the lifestyle changes were fun and enjoyable,” 24.1% chose “If a loved one/relative/friend develops a brain disorder,” 16.7% chose “If the lifestyle changes were affordable,” 13.0% chose “If my friends/family are willing to support me in the journey,” and 1.9% chose “Nothing would motivate me.”

8) To prevent cognitive decline, would you be willing to change your lifestyle if it meant that you had to refrain from certain behaviors that you may enjoy (e.g., drinking wine, etc.)?

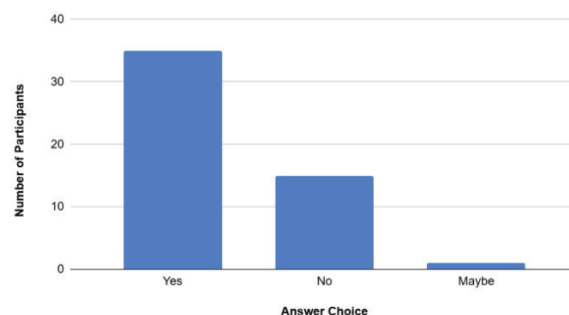


Figure 8: Participants were asked to answer, “To prevent cognitive decline, would you be willing to change your lifestyle if it meant that you had to refrain from certain behaviors that you may enjoy (e.g., drinking wine, etc.)?” Participants could choose one option, and a total of 51 individuals responded to this question. Individuals could choose either Yes (68.6%), No (29.4%), or Maybe (2.0%) for this question.

10) Are you aware of any tools/assessments to evaluate people's brain health?

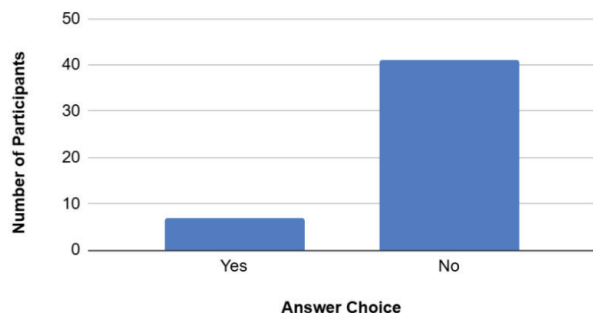


Figure 10: Respondents were asked the question, “Are you aware of any tools/assessments to evaluate people's brain health?” Seniors could only choose one option. A total of 48 seniors responded to this survey question, and 14.6% responded “Yes” and 85.4% responded “No.”

11) On a scale of 1 to 5, are you aware of the brain health research that is currently being conducted?

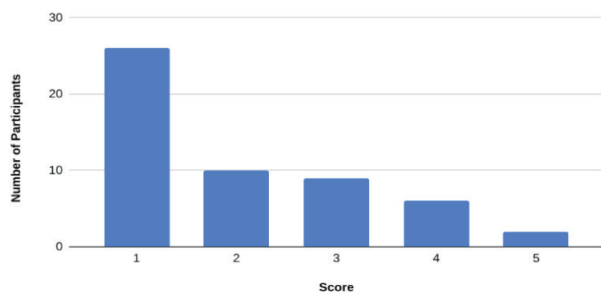


Figure 11: Respondents utilized a Likert scale between 1 and 5 to answer the question “On a scale of 1 to 5, are you aware of the brain health research that is currently being conducted?” A rating of 1 corresponds to individuals not knowing anything, and a rating of 5 corresponds to individuals knowing a lot about the concept. Seniors were instructed to select one option, and a total of 53 individuals responded. Of those that answered the question, 49.1 % chose ‘1,’ 18.9% chose ‘2,’ 17.0% chose ‘3,’ 11.3% chose ‘4,’ and 3.8% chose ‘5.’ The results clearly highlight that most seniors weren’t aware of current research in the community, meaning that they likely also can’t immediately benefit from the results of such studies.

■ Discussions

Overall, through Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and free-response survey questions, the perspectives of seniors in Northeast Ohio on brain health were better understood. Initially, when seniors answer the first few questions on the survey, such as “What is Brain Health,” it is noticed that seniors have an understanding of the role of brain health in preserving memory and the brain’s functionality. On the contrary, when more specific and in-depth questions were asked on dementia and neurodegenerative diseases, it was clear that seniors didn’t have a full understanding of the brain. Moreover, many seniors also reported not having access to brain health resources and are unaware of the current research being conducted in the brain health field.

These findings are supported by previous studies within this field. For example, the paper written by Niechcial et al. highlights that there is a large variability in the public’s brain health knowledge. 1 Additionally, they noted that individuals with a lower educational background were noted to have a lower

understanding of brain health. This is an aspect that could potentially be tested in the future when conducting studies on seniors in Northeast Ohio.

While this study certainly has implications in aiding the overall understanding of the Northeast Ohio seniors’ perception and perspective on brain health, there are certainly limitations. One such is the sample size. Previous studies conducted in this field have included a large sample size. Yet, it is important to note that those studies pertained to a large geographic population. Since this research study’s scope was only Northeast Ohio, it is quite understandable that the sample size was small. In the future, however, seniors from a wider range of senior centers can be surveyed to understand their brain health perspectives.

Additionally, another potential limitation of this study is response bias. Since seniors were asked to self-respond to the survey questions, some seniors could have potentially answered falsely to seem more socially desirable. However, even in the event of this potential bias, there was still a considerable percentage of senior respondents who highlighted the surface-level understanding of brain health in the Northeast Ohio community.

■ Conclusion

Through this study, it was elucidated that seniors in Northeast Ohio have a foundational understanding of brain health. Their knowledge of brain health was apparent in the free-response questions, where all respondents provided accurate answers about what brain health means. While having such an understanding of brain health is most certainly the first step one can take towards protecting their brain, most seniors lack a nuanced understanding of brain health. In fact, a majority of them were unaware of the immense number of resources offered to bolster their brain health.

This suggests that while seniors can answer the question “What is Brain Health,” they are either unable to access or unaware of the resources available to them. This is a major finding of this study, and it is a critical challenge that needs to be addressed. This lack of knowledge can impact individuals who need help but don’t know where to begin their brain health journey. Essentially, this paper helps to pinpoint the main gap in the current community resources. Brain health advocates can use the findings from this paper to understand how to bolster the resources they provide to the public. For example, raising awareness and sharing resources might be more beneficial to seniors than teaching them the meaning of brain health, as they seem to have less knowledge of the former than the latter.

In the future, this study will be further expanded to include participants from more cities in Northeast Ohio to get a more holistic view of brain health perspectives.

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