

# SENIOR ODYSSEY: A PROGRAM OF INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

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## RATIONALE

The engagement hypothesis of cognitive aging suggests that intellectual functioning may be enhanced in adulthood by a lifestyle rich in social and intellectual activities, so that healthy minds are engaged minds.

## PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

The Senior Odyssey program was designed to promote cognitive functioning through mindful engagement with creative problem solving activities. Based on Odyssey of the Mind (www.odysseyofthemind.com), the Senior Odyssey engages cognition in the context of collaborative activity on a regular basis over a 20-week Odyssey season. Teams of 5 to 7 elders work together to develop solutions to problems exercising speed of processing, working memory, fluency, visual-spatial processing, and inductive reasoning in an informal context designed to be fun. The typical season revolves around one long-term problem selected by the team and numerous spontaneous problems. The Senior Odyssey season culminates in a tournament at which each team presents its solution to the long-term problem and competes in the solution to a novel spontaneous problem.



## ANSWERS TO PROBLEMS:

PICT RES: You should be in pictures  
KNOWITNO: No two ways about it  
A) Next number in series is 1,024. Previous number multiplied by 4  
B) Next number in series is 22. These are numbers that start with the letter T.

## ACTIVITIES

### Spontaneous Problems

Spontaneous problems are fast-paced and encourage participants to think on their feet. They are presented in cycles of problems of different types that increase in difficulty throughout each session. These activities encourage active problem solving in a collaborative context so that participants typically have to consider what others in the group have done and build on that.

**“In the News Tonight”**  
Team members will begin a news story. Each member will add to the story.

**What is the next number in this series?**  
A) 1, 4, 16, 64, 256, ?  
B) 2, 3, 10, 12, 13, 20, 21, ?

**Given**  
paper, pipe cleaners, cotton balls, foil, markers  
**Task**  
create a treasure map leading to the most important part of life

**KNOWITNO**

**PICT RES**



### Long-term Problems

Long-term problems are open-ended with no single perfect solution. Problems are designed so that participants of varying ability levels can solve the problem in some way. A new set of long-term problems is developed each year and teams work together through the season on design, implementation, and effective presentation. Long-term problems are drawn from four broad areas – literature, science and technology, civil engineering, and history.

#### Ancient Egypt

Teams create an original performance that takes place in ancient Egypt. The presentation must include either a pharaoh, king, or queen, ancient Egyptian works of art/artifacts created by the team, and an explanation about the construction of an ancient Egyptian architectural structure.

#### Geometry Structure

The team's problem is to design and build a structure of balsa wood and glue. The team will build geometric shapes into the structure's design and attach colored paper to the shapes. The structure will be tested for its ability to balance and support as much weight as possible.

#### The Jungle Bloke

Teams create a performance about a “Bloke,” a person who has the ability to talk with and understand animals from a jungle. The animals will tell the Bloke about a problem that exists and get the Bloke to help. The presentation must include an original song and dance.



## WHAT WE HAVE FOUND SO FAR

- Older adults who report more frequent engagement in different types of activities show generally higher cognitive scores
- Individuals who are mindful (i.e., awareness of alternative perspectives) and are open to new experiences, perform better on cognitive tasks
- Relative to wait-list controls, Senior Odyssey participants show increments in fluency and speed of processing, as well as in Mindfulness

## CONCLUSION

This research suggests that contexts that create opportunities for intellectual engagement may contribute to maintenance of an active lifestyle and enhance certain aspects of cognition over the life span, thus facilitating successful aging.



We are grateful from support from the National Institute on Aging (R03 AG024551) and NIA Roybal Center for Healthy Minds (P30 AG023101). We also would like to thank Joanne Rompel and Sammy Micklus from Odyssey of the Mind for their advice, support, and materials.

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