

Brain Attitudes Project

Public Report

Funded by: The DANA Foundation

**AI assisted in the synthesis of the information included in this deck*

Project Goals

Identify existing public concerns about brain health in local Chicago communities.

Host impactful public events about brain health in the Chicago area.

Build a roadmap based on our experiences to help others create effective events and materials through HCD.

Narrative Outline

Research Review:

- Where is the literature?
- What is the academic perspective on public attitudes/needs?

Translation check:

- Do the findings in the literature match what we see in our community?
- What new insights can we get by engaging with community members?

Initial hypothesis testing:

- Can we design an effective event based on what we've heard?

Community Expertise and co-design:

- Do our ideas ring true for those already engaging within the community?
- Where are the opportunities to empower and synergize with existing efforts?

Research Inputs

Lit Review Summary

Themes and Takeaways

Expert Interview

INPUT

Summary of Literature Review

'Brain Health' is broad and inconsistently defined. Not often used colloquially.

Six Pillars Framework

Exercise
Diet
Medical Health
Sleep
Mental Stimulation
Social Stimulation

Source: Cleveland Clinic



INPUT

Summary of Literature Review

Related topics do show up often in media.

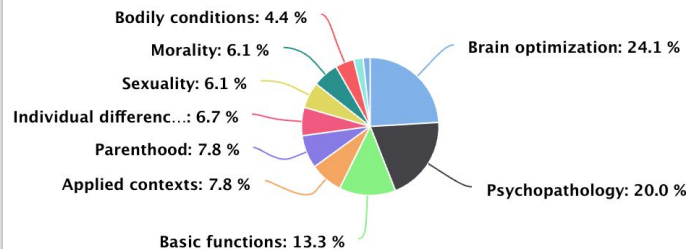
Optimization and pathology are the most common foci

Media Focus

Brain Optimization
Psychopathology
Basic Functions
Applied Contexts
Parenthood
Individual Differences
Sexuality
Morality
Bodily Conditions
Futuristic Phenomena
Spiritual Experiences

Source: UK Meta analysis

Subjects Addressed within Media Coverage of Neuroscience



Literature Review Themes

Studies/polls often:

Do not explicitly name 'brain health' as a category

- Use 'mental health' as a catch-all term when it is studied
- Solely identify depression, suicidality and anxiety by name

Present memory issues as of core interest

- Focusing heavily on Alzheimer's Disease
- This mirrors public awareness

Find that people trust mental health treatments

- And want to look to professionals for help/information
- ...but struggle to access them due to cost, stigma

Surface brain-health-related concerns like:

- Gender/sexuality factors in wellbeing and access to care
- Sleep health
- 'Emotional stress'
- A reticence to take mental health medications

Summary of Reported Perceptions and Attitudes

Perceptions and Attitudes about Brain Health from Research

- People believe that healthy lifestyle choices (avoiding tobacco, eating fruits and veggies, staying social, seeing doctors, doing puzzles) can improve their brain and feel optimistic about improving theirs, but often struggle to follow through.
- They are generally excited about brains and consider doctors a top source of information on brain health, but rarely have conversations with them.
- They rarely engage deeply with brain science concepts in daily life, and tend to separate “mind” from “brain”, on the pattern of “mental” and “physical” health.
- Scientific literacy is limited and influenced by ‘neuromyths’ like “we only use 10% of our brains,” and inaccuracies in popular portrayals of mental health.
- They rely on basic narratives and models of general health (e.g. nutrition-based, genetic/fatalistic, environmental, etc.) to understand brain health.
- They’re most curious about improving brain function, aging, and understanding behavior.
- Many worry about future declines in brain health, especially in their memories.

Design Inputs

Design Approach / Hypotheses

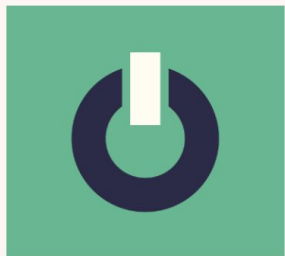
Community Member Interview Insights

Brain Garden: Prototype Insights

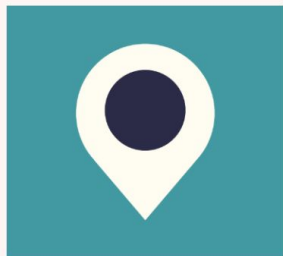
Community Leader Workshop Insights

Design Approach

Codesign Framework



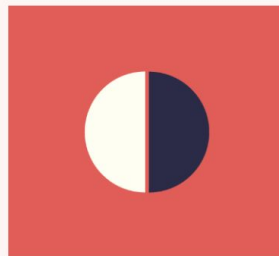
Cultivate



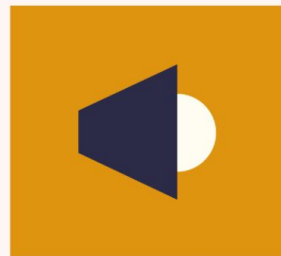
Engage



Design



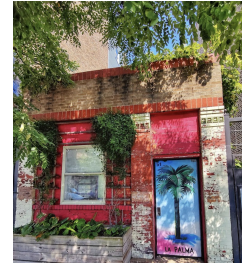
Research



Produce

Pilsen and Surrounding Communities

Chicago, IL



Community Brain Health Engagement

Design Hypotheses

- People don't have strong associations with the term 'brain health' - but prompting with aging or family concerns can get them talking
- People are interested in tips for daily activities that will help them to 'optimize' their brains (food, exercise, brain games, mindfulness)
- People are finding lots of information online about how to take care of their brains
- Community connections are a good way to approach brain health
- A topic area of interest is "What to avoid vs what to DO" for brain health
- People believe brain/mental health and physical health are related

WHAT WE HEARD

Making Meaning About Brain Health

- “ When I think about the term brain health, it's sort of a broad term and sort of encompasses having your brain, your thought process, your feelings, function in an optimized way.”
- “ Everything starts in the brain, so having a healthy mind is super important.”
- “ For me, brain health really means the mental state of your brain... having that balance between what you feed it, physically and mentally.”

WHAT WE HEARD

Current Conversations

“ I can't really specifically remember any conversations about brain health with friends or family members.”

“ I don't think we have had a conversation specifically centered around brain health. Maybe it just never came up.”

“ So brain health actually comes up a lot in my family, just due to Alzheimer's and dementia...”

WHAT WE HEARD

Needs and Desires for Brain Health

- “ I would love to understand more about mindfulness and meditation practices... I'd be interested to know what other mind exercises can support my long term brain health.”
- “ I would first like to know how to keep my brain healthy and activities I can do that might endure brain health. Specifically daily things I could be doing.”
- “ I want to know what part of it is working when I do certain actions. I also want to know if there's anything I can do to really make it work efficiently!”

SYNTHESIS

Major Insights & Needs

General

- There is a broad, holistic understanding of brain health.
- Contextual differences exist by life stage (young adults / mid-career adults / older adults and those who care for them)
- Community members are seeking practical, science-based tips
- Stigma, discomfort, and lack of interest limit brain health discussion within families and communities ...although community and family involvement matter greatly.
- Accessibility and resource barriers are present
- No universal solution fits everyone - brain health content needs to be adaptive and flexible

SYNTHESIS

Major Insights & Needs

Attitudes

We heard a mix of proactive curiosity and cautious skepticism, with a strong desire for tailored, practical guidance on brain health.

Proactive but Cautious

Participants generally want to be proactive in maintaining their brain health but often feel unsure about the best methods.

Connection Between Body and Mind

Strong belief in the interrelation between physical health, mental health, and brain health.

Interest in Personalization

Curiosity about what works for their specific needs, acknowledging individual differences.

Skepticism of Pop Science

While open to information from media, participants show skepticism about unverified claims, emphasizing the need for trustworthy sources.

SYNTHESIS

Major Insights & Needs

Summary

From students to stroke survivors, all crave straightforward, research-backed, culturally sensitive **guidance for daily brain health actions.**

Integrating emotional well-being, community support, and practical habit formation is key.

Empathetic communication, accessible resources, and relatable multimedia content can **normalize brain health discussions and empower individuals across diverse life stages** and backgrounds to maintain and enhance cognitive well-being.

Areas of Interest

Daily Routines and Small Actionable Steps: Many expressed a desire for simple, concrete habits they could integrate into daily life. This included suggestions around nutrition, sleep hygiene, short mental exercises, or easy home activities—such as puzzles, digital brain games, or short moments of rest.



Food, Nutrition, and Diet: Many participants drew an immediate link between what they eat and how their brain feels and functions. They showed enthusiasm for understanding which foods or nutrients support cognitive health, memory, and clarity.

Stress Reduction, Mindfulness, and Emotional Well-Being: Across all data sources, participants were interested in practical ways to manage stress and maintain emotional balance—both for immediate relief and long-term cognitive benefits.

Memory, Aging, and Dementia Prevention: Participants with personal or family histories of dementia or Alzheimer's paid particular attention to topics related to memory upkeep, early warning signs, and everyday habits that might slow cognitive decline.

SYNTHESIS

Additional Areas of Interest

Understanding Brain Health as More than “Mental Health”: While many initially equated brain health with mental health, participants were intrigued by the broader, more nuanced definitions.

Family, Community, and Social Engagement: Participants seemed drawn to the idea that brain health could be a shared, communal effort. As well as ways to improve brain health awareness and practices in community settings.

Learning and Education: Techniques to improve focus, learning, and cognitive resilience came up a few times.

We will explore these areas as potential guidelines (instead of headline topic areas) for developing the previously listed ‘areas of interest’ as they came up less in our initial research, but they are still relevant to the design of the events.

INPUT: PROTOTYPE

Event 1: Park

Palmisano Park: Pilsen

Our first event: Brain Garden

Mindfulness through art using healthy foods as watercolor paints



SYNTHESIS

Updates to Major Insights

Incorporating Field Data

- **Greater Kid Engagement and Creative Entry Points:** This suggests that interactive, art-based approaches may resonate strongly with younger audiences—something the initial synthesis didn't highlight as clearly.
- **Communal Support and Anticipating Others' Needs:** This indicates that interactive, communal experiences can reinforce social ties and potentially enhance the perception of brain health as a collective practice rather than an individual pursuit.
- **Parents' Engagement Challenges:** This situational factor—being in “supervision mode”—limits direct adult participation in brain-health-related engagement activities.
- **Educators are Seeking Inspiration:** This suggests brain health topics could attract educators interested in incorporating such concepts into curricula, potentially broadening outreach strategies and resource development.

SYNTHESIS

Updates to Major Insights

Incorporating Field Data

- **Frequency of Considering “Health” vs. Low Salience of “Brain Health” and “Mental Health”:** Although interviews indicated that most participants think about health frequently, the field notes underscore a gap: people consider general health multiple times daily, yet “brain health” and “mental health” are not top-of-mind.
- **Interest in Understanding Others’ Minds:** The field notes highlight curiosity around better understanding others’ behavior and cognition (e.g., children or older relatives).

WHAT WE HEARD

Advice from Community Leaders

“ We have to let them feel like [the] space is theirs.”

(Indicates the importance of making participants feel valued, heard, and respected for what they already know.)

“ It’s not always about [individual ‘fixes’], there are structural issues like racism, financial strain, and time constraints that matter too.”

(Highlights the need to acknowledge systemic factors that shape brain health, rather than isolating it as purely individual responsibility.)

“ You have to have strong community partners who are reliable leaders.”

(Emphasizes building events with known, credible local groups to foster trust and relevance.)

SYNTHESIS

Community Leader Insights

General

Insights we heard from the community leaders about their communities indicate cultural nuances and societal issues that need to be considered in our event designs.

Brain health is viewed through practical, interpersonal, and structural lenses.

Confusion between brain health, mental health, and physical health is common.

Distrust in healthcare and digital systems persists, particularly in marginalized communities.

Structural inequities significantly impact brain health prioritization.

Affirming and valuing lived experience over expert-driven models is an approach for better engagement

SYNTHESIS

Overall Community Leader Attitudes

- Leaders considered brain health important yet somewhat unclear, approaching it with open-minded curiosity.
- They viewed it as closely connected to daily routines, personal experiences, and caring for loved ones with cognitive challenges.
- While eager to learn, they were wary of being lectured or patronized, preferring acknowledgment of their existing knowledge and lived experiences.
- They recognized systemic and social factors affecting health outcomes, wanting these contexts acknowledged rather than ignored.
- Overall, community leaders desired a welcoming, empathetic approach that seamlessly integrated brain health into their and their community members' everyday lives.

SYNTHESIS

Community Leader Feedback

Event Design Feedback

Actionable Recommendations

Community-Led Initiatives**

Partner with trusted local leaders and organizations.

Use co-creation and iterative design to tailor programming.

Event Design

Use simple, flexible agendas with sensory engagement (art, food, tactile activities).

Provide clear takeaways, such as infographics or gamified tools.

Holistic Framing

Frame brain health as interconnected with daily life, systemic issues, and cultural practices.

Encourage open dialogue about structural inequities impacting health.

SYNTHESIS

Community Leader Feedback

Event Design Feedback

Additional Key Design Feedback

- Hands-on, interactive formats like games and storytelling are most effective.
- Social connections and collective learning foster deeper engagement.
- Clear, actionable next steps (e.g., QR codes, gamified takeaways) garner more continuing engagement.
- Importance of lived experiences and accessible, non-judgmental messaging.
- Need to address societal barriers instead of solely individual-focused solutions.
- Partnerships with trusted, local organizations (schools, libraries, churches) boost trust and turnout.
- Food offerings and culturally familiar environments enhance inclusivity.

SYNTHESIS

Community Leader Insights

Summary

Compared to the initial synthesis, the community leaders' perspectives add a **stronger emphasis on structural oppression**, the need for culturally specific and anti-racist approaches, affirming existing community wisdom, and integrating a **broader range of healing practices**.

They advocate for measuring success not just by individual behavior changes or learning outcomes, but by **participants feeling empowered, seen, and supported** in systemic struggles that influence their brain health.

SYNTHESIS

Overall Community Insights

12 online interviews

Prototype Event Intercept
interviews: 51 attendees Adults
& children

Community Leaders Workshop
(4 attendees)

Topic Areas to Highlight

Small Habits: Food, Nutrition, Diet & More: Building simple, actionable habits to support brain health through nutrition and eating as well as other daily behaviors.

Memory, Aging, and Dementia Prevention: Understanding and mitigating risks of Alzheimer's and dementia.

Stress Reduction, Mindfulness, and Emotional Well-Being: Managing anxiety, stress, and depression through brain health strategies.

Brain Health Attitudes to Engage

Grow attitudes of curiosity, proactive behaviors and interest in personalization by providing engaging experiences that incorporate community.

Support communal attitude around brain health by presenting basic information about brain health while giving access to nearby community services.

Validate current knowledge and experience in context when engaging with the information and topic areas.

SYNTHESIS

Literature & Community

Topic Areas of Interest
Comparison

Topic Areas (Literature)

Topic Areas (Community)



Synthesis

Hypotheses and Insights Comparison

Hypotheses

People are not talking about brain health
- but prompting with aging or family
concerns can get them talking

Interests in tips for daily activities to
increase brain health are desired (food,
exercise, brain games, mindfulness)
(people are trying to optimize their brains)

Community connections are a good way
to approach brain health

Insights

There is a broad, holistic
understanding of brain health.

Community members are seeking
practical, science-based tips

Stigma, discomfort, and lack of
interest limit brain health
discussion within families and
communities ...although
community and family
involvement matter greatly.

Synthesis

Hypotheses and Insights Comparison

Hypotheses

People are finding lots of information online about how to take care of their brains



Insights

Accessibility and resource barriers are present for events

A topic area of interest is “What to avoid vs what to DO” for brain health



Community members are seeking practical, science-based tips

People believe brain/mental health and physical health are related



There is a broad, holistic understanding of brain health.



Frequency of Considering “Health” vs. Low Salience of “Brain Health” and “Mental Health”:

Unanticipated Insights

Contextual differences exist by life stage (young adults / mid-career adults / older adults and those who care for them)

No universal solution fits everyone - brain health content needs to be adaptive and flexible

Greater Kid Engagement and Creative Entry Points

Parents' Engagement Challenges

Educators are Seeking Inspiration

Interest in Understanding Others' Minds

Design Headings

Event Design Guidelines

Co-Designed Success Metrics

Design Guidelines

EVENT DESIGN GUIDELINES

Start with Familiar, Everyday Topics: Introduce brain health through relatable entry points and position it as part of daily life.

Keep Language and Format Simple, Affirming, and Culturally Relevant: Avoid jargon, use a friendly tone, offer translations, and present information in brief, accessible formats.

Build on Existing Community Knowledge and Contextual Realities: Validate attendees' lived experiences, allow storytelling, and acknowledge systemic challenges impacting brain health.

Use Interactive, Positive, and Age-Inclusive Approaches: Favor small-group discussions, games, art projects, and scenarios over lectures, with activities tailored to different ages and abilities.

Prioritize Reflective Representation: Partner with known, credible organizations, ensure presenters reflect the community, provide safe, convenient spaces, and return frequently to build trust.

Offer Concrete Takeaways: Provide practical tools, resource lists, and culturally resonant calls to action, plus follow-up opportunities to maintain engagement.

Check In and Evaluate Continuously: Use before-and-after surveys, comment cards, and brief interviews to gauge impact, then refine future events based on community feedback.

Provide accessibility: Ensure brain health events are physically accessible by hosting them in barrier-free venues near public transit, providing seating and accommodations for various mobility needs, and ensuring well-lit, safe spaces for all participants.

Co-Designed Success Metrics

1. Duration of Attendance
2. Engagement
3. Monitor Questions Being Asked
4. Collect Testimonials
5. If Participants Can Come Up With Responses to Some Questions
6. If Participants Walk Away With Answers/Strategies to Use
7. If Participants Walk Away With More Questions
8. Hearing Stories Through Participants' Own Creations (Photos, Poetry, Drawings, Words)
9. If Participants Leave Feeling They Have Received Something (Valued, Informed)
10. If Participants Feel Proud of Themselves Without Centering Productivity (Intrinsic Value)
11. If Participants Feel More Resourced / Empowered
12. If the Event Is Filled with BIPOC, Queer, Trans, and Disabled Folks