

Ask Hedy! *On a regular basis, Hedy Ciocci, B.S.N., Administrator of the Selfhelp Home will answer some of the many questions we have around aging. Hedy specializes in dementia care, has extensive experience working with families and elderly patients, and is a registered nurse. She is a frequent lecturer on issues of aging.*

Recently, Hedy interviewed Art Tursh regarding seniors' use of technology and ways to make learning computers easier for older adults. Art Tursh is Senior Telecom Engineer at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

Hedy also spoke with Ellen Berland, an 84-year old resident at a senior living community who recently learned how to use a computer and the internet to communicate with friends and relatives.



Hedy Ciocci

Computers aren't Just for Kids!

What's the best way to find your favorite restaurant, get the latest review and see what they are serving on their menu? Spend just a few minutes on the internet and all this information is available with just a few keystrokes. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Commerce, people over the age of 50 are the fastest growing segment of internet users. In fact, from 1998 to 2001, the number of females over the age of 50 using the internet increased at an annual rate of 31%. Today, 35% of females over the age of

50 use the internet, compared with 40% of males over the age of 50.

The ability to e-mail anyone, at anytime from anywhere combined with the abundance of health, lifestyle and financial information has given seniors more reasons to learn to use the internet and computers in general.

Even more interesting is the fact that 90% of online seniors use the internet for e-mail, 72% of online seniors use it to research products and services and 43% use it to check health information. In fact, 41% purchase products

and services online and 13% do their banking online. With this growing population, more affordable computer options and the time to learn and use computers, seniors are rapidly catching up to the young "techies" who once led the internet charge!

To learn more about how seniors can become comfortable with computers and the wonders of the internet, we posed a few questions to Art Tursh.

Do you think that seniors learn differently than younger people? Are there different techniques that you would use in teaching seniors?

I would say that repetition is the key to learning and it is not just working with seniors. In my own experience, I find you retain more when you practice something over and over. As a young person, your mind is like a sponge, and it is much easier to learn technical skills or anything that requires memorization. As you get older, your mind becomes less "absorbent." Therefore, repeating tasks and reviewing the same information makes it easier for seniors to learn to do just about anything.

It can be intimidating for seniors to sit behind a computer screen for the first time. What are some of the skills you teach beginners?

I usually start with basic e-mail and attaching photos or documents to e-mail because chances are, their families are using e-mail to communicate. I also teach them the wonders of the internet and simple search engines so that they learn how to use a phrase or word to find something they are looking for. I introduce them to

all the academic and cultural resources that are available on the internet so they can begin to realize what a resource the internet truly is. The fact that the entire world is migrating to this type of communication is pretty amazing. It is a profound sociological event and it would be a shame to live in this time and not see this unfolding. Technology is so rapidly evolving that today's e-mail could become tomorrow's video-mail or voice-mail.

Seniors don't see as well and the normal screen is 17" or 19" which can be difficult for people with vision problems to see clearly. What kind of solutions do you recommend?

You can find 32" monitors now and I have found this very helpful for seniors as it is much easier for them to use the computer with this type of larger screen. There is a new software product, called Naturally Speaking that translates speech into text. The use of this type of software requires fewer technical skills, like typing and this might make it easier for seniors to use a computer. You simply plug a microphone into the audio input and the software understands what you are saying. This allows you to

do word processing without having to type and there is another function that allows you to command the computer to search the internet, etc.

There are also magnifiers that can go over the screen to enlarge the type. This might be helpful as well.

I also visited with an assisted living resident, Ellen Berland who is 84 years old and recently learned how to use the computer to communicate with friends and family in all parts of the world. Ellen provides some interesting insight into how she uses her computer and the benefits this technology has for seniors.

How difficult was it for you to learn the computer?

It was not too difficult. The first thing they asked me was if I was able to type. I never learned typing because the war had started and I was not able to finish high school. But when you want to learn something, you learn it. My instructor made it very easy for me. Now, I receive e-mails from Israel and California. I have made birthday cards and get well cards on the computer for my friends too.

What do you think about the computer?

It's unbelievable what you can do! You can get all the news and it is number one in my heart. I am 84 years old and I am telling you, that when you want to do something, you do it.

As long as you can see and read the letters on the keyboard, it is easy. I even wrote a letter in German to my friend and sent it to her in Germany. I love using the computer.

Did you ever think you would learn the computer at your age?

No, I got it in 2001 and I have kept up with it. You can find out so many things on the computer. My grandson in California has a laptop and works on a cruise ship. He takes his computer with him and can e-mail me from the cruise ship. It is wonderful.

Seniors have found that "surfing the net" is a great way to stay in touch with friends and relatives, keep up with current affairs, research anything and everything, and even play games and shop. Computers, and certainly the internet, are not just for kids anymore!