

Members Comments on the Benefits of Playing Bridge

As you are aware, I have a severe hearing problem. Whilst I am well supported at home there is no doubt that I had become socially isolated as a result.

I decided to learn and play bridge purely because of my interest in card/mind games and because I believed that my hearing loss would not be too detrimental to my enjoyment of the activity.

To my surprise and pleasure, I have found that the social interaction involved has also been of great benefit to me. I have made some good friends at Hitchin bridge club with similar interests outside of bridge with whom I now socialise. My wife and I now play bridge socially with people that we were fortunate to meet on the bridge course. To anybody with a severe hearing loss a much improved social life is of great benefit.

I also believe that the activity of bridge in itself is of great benefit to me. A three hour session of duplicate bridge has forced me to concentrate and think hard over a long period of time. I found this difficult at first, but I am sure that my concentration has improved as a result. As dementia runs in my family, I can only draw the conclusion that this "mind workout" will be of benefit to my future health.

Finally, for me, the bridge club is not just about the activity of bridge. The club actually becomes a small community in itself which brings people together in a positive way. (C)

A weekly gathering can be particularly important to those people who, for whatever reason, do not get the chance to spend quality time with other people.

For myself, I enjoy and value the mental stimulus of bridge, but have also met a great many people in different bridge venues throughout the West Midlands and now in and around Hitchin. Playing bridge is an easy way into a community which may otherwise seem very alien when moving to another part of the country. Thank you for your help in this.

Can I tell you about an old bridge partner of mine who lives in Sutton Coldfield? He is in his eighties and has a wife who contracted MS in her forties and has only recently had to go into a local home. He visits her everyday but is lonely at home. So, he has opened his house on Saturday afternoons to new bridge players (mainly old ladies) who need a bit more confidence before tackling the duplicate sessions at the local clubs. He provides bridge, tea, and cakes and by all accounts a very convivial atmosphere. This generous gesture has changed their lives in the same way that bridge clubs can do throughout the country. (J)

After a series of mid-life crises, including my parents' deaths, my husband's suffering from a life-threatening form of lymphoma, a major career crisis and my only child's leaving home, I was suffering from moderate depression.

I needed a new, absorbing interest to stimulate and entertain me, so I took bridge lessons at Hitchin Bridge Club from October 2010 to June 2011. I loved the challenge of learning something new, and have become a very enthusiastic - if not very talented - bridge player. As well as attending club sessions once or twice a week, I play social bridge almost every week with a couple whom I met in my bridge classes. They have become close friends of my husband and me: we have been on holiday together, and I have played at bridge clubs in France and England. I have made other good friends at Hitchin Bridge Club, and I thrive in the Club's friendly and informal atmosphere.

I can't imagine any other activity that would have enhanced my social, intellectual and psychological well-being as much as the experience of learning and playing bridge at Hitchin Bridge Club - it's a lot better for me, and cheaper for the State, than decades on Seroxat! (S)

Four years ago, I retired after an intensive forty year career in local government estates management. Whilst I am lucky enough to have friends and family around me, I suddenly found that life appeared to have stopped. The intensity and long hours of my work had precluded much in the way of hobbies, and I was aware that my mind was stagnating. It was at that point that it was suggested to me that I should learn how to play bridge. Hitchin Bridge Club gave me that opportunity, and whilst I am painfully aware of my limitations in the game, I find it highly stimulating and great fun, opening new doors and friendships to me. (A)

I was diagnosed with cancer in 2007 which meant reducing from full time to part time work before I was ready to. Taking up playing bridge after a gap of 15 years has given me the emotional support needed to cope with the cancer and move from full time work through part time to fully retired. As I now run bridge sessions and support bridge training sessions it has allowed me to use the skills I gained through working and gives me an active and stimulating retirement. (E)

Through learning and playing bridge I have kept my brain active in my old age and made many new friends. Learning to play bridge is an exciting and time consuming experience. I try so hard to remember the many conventions of bridge that I have little time to think about minor ailments. (A)

My husband died over 4 years ago of a brain tumour. While he was very ill, I retired at the age of 60 to be with him and shortly afterwards he died leaving me feeling lonely and depressed. I decided to make some new friends and interests. One of the best things I did was to join the Hitchin Bridge Club where I learnt to play bridge and now attend the club once or twice a week. I have made lots of new friends and we play together in each other's houses and attend various charitable bridge afternoons in addition to club evenings to raise money for good causes. Bridge has been wonderful for me and I would love to see more interest and help in such mind sports from our local councils. (J)

I have greatly enjoyed the company and mental stimulation of playing bridge again while working away from home. It also keeps me out of the pub, which is perhaps more of a reflection on me, but one thing worth emphasising is that it is a relatively cheap occupation.

In terms of the game itself, the combination of high skill levels, coupled with some luck encourages tolerance and a sense of humour in a way that (say) chess does not. Having played both games to a reasonable standard (I was a county first team chess player when younger), I know which is more relaxing. In terms of the benefits for the elderly, my grandmother died at 83 having taught me to play cards, first whist and then bridge, and remained mentally sharp until her final illness. (I)

Since retiring from business I managed to allay the loss of day to day contact with work colleagues by taking on the responsibility of Captain of my local golf club which provided me with the opportunity to use my management experience to keep the club abreast, and indeed ahead of, the current needs towards the social and physical benefits of playing golf.

With advancing years my mobility started to suffer with the onset of arthritis in the knees and I started to look at other ways to maintain social interaction with people of a similar ilk and decided to take up duplicate bridge after many years playing the 'rubber bridge' version of the game.

Since joining the Hitchin Bridge Club, both my wife and I have found that, the social and mental stimulus of playing this most enthralling game has given us an extra impetus to enjoy the latter years of our life. We have both found many new friends amongst the membership of the club and look forward to many years to come. (M & M)

Whilst there is a progressive attitude within government to tackle obesity by encouraging people to engage in some form of exercise to keep the pounds off and lead a healthier lifestyle, it should not be forgotten that mental as well as physical exercise are both equally important - particularly with the seeming increase in mental dementia.

Lest we should forget, the much hackneyed phrase 'Use it or lose it' applies both to mental as well as physical activity. (R)

I am a widower aged 75. When I lost my wife fifteen years ago, I was quite lost because I had depended on her for our social life and I retired soon afterwards. But a friend told me to cheer up and join a bridge club (I had never heard of bridge clubs until then).

She was absolutely right – joining my local bridge club gave me immediate access to a rich social life based on a variety of new friends, some of whom have since become holiday companions (a major issue when you lose your spouse), and all of whom are very supportive often well away from the Club.

For example, my poor eyesight prevents me from driving, but I am always offered a lift to bridge and even more important, to hospital by club members. One group of members regularly visits a lonely member with terminal cancer to cheer her up and provide a little social bridge.

Bridge, for me, has been a real godsend in overcoming the loneliness of widowhood- I just wish more people knew about it. Sadly, we do not get any recognition from the local council. (D)

When we downsized, having retired, we arrived not knowing anyone in the area and decided that it would be fun to be able to have a hobby that we could enjoy together. We saw an advert for the bridge club, and we enrolled in the bridge classes never having played before. Since then and through the club we have made many friends and have seen the club go from strength to strength. Apart from the social aspect of the club we feel that our brains are given a much needed work out something we feel is vital to keeping old age at bay. (T & S)

At all levels and for all ages, Club Bridge provides a challenging intellectual environment in a (hopefully!) friendly social context. This may be especially important for the retired who no longer have the similar rigour and discipline that many jobs provide. For myself, who has been involved in some problematic voluntary work since retiring, it has also sometimes been the essential 'island of sanity' in particularly difficult weeks! (B)

I first came to the club and started lessons three years after my first husband died. I had looked after John at home for over 16 years since his first stroke and I had been rather tied to the house and so I was rather at a loss when he died – in other words my reason for living had been removed. I was encouraged to come to the club by a friend and this was just what I needed. It took me out of the house for a few hours and apart from saying 'good evening' I did not need to enter into deep conversation with anyone if I did not wish to. I had people around me and I could focus on the bridge. I have made many friends since I joined, and I would recommend bridge to anyone who was lonely or depressed. (R)

I am 67 years old and have been a very able and active sportsman all my life. While I am still a regular golfer my age means that I am now unable to participate in those sporting activities that were so much a part of my earlier life.

Recently I started playing bridge at the Hitchin Bridge Club and I now pretty well get the same enjoyment from bridge that I used to get when I was playing soccer, hockey, cricket, tennis, squash, badminton etc in my younger days. Just as I used to nervously look forward to playing those sports of my youth, I now have that same feeling before my bridge night. I have a team member to play with and opposition to play against. I am able to plan with my partner a means to beat or defend against the opposition and then try to put those plans into action. I need to be flexible to vary my approach should something change during each game and I need to be quick in response to such demands. Of course, those earlier sports required the thought process and the physical application, now it is the mind game and a different type of application.

Bridge and the other sports I mentioned have many similarities. Bridge is like golf, because it too enables me to play with and against players of vastly differing ages, abilities, from all walks of life and of both sexes. All bridge players are using the game as the medium for keeping their minds active while at the same time enjoying themselves in the company of others.

I would be the first to admit that I am not the best bridge player, but I do my best and I still try to win. I always was a competitive being! Like my earlier sporting engagements though, it is not a win at all costs attitude, but it is just great to be involved in a pastime that gives me an opportunity to pit myself against others and at the end of the game it is still good to shake the hands of my opponents. I love it! (M)

Although advancing years and declining mobility tend to restrict our physical activities, we find that the challenges of learning and playing bridge are extremely helpful in exercising our brains and keeping us mentally alert. Just as importantly, through bridge we have developed a number of new friendships at a time in our lives when this has become less easy to do. (P & P)

I am a firm believer in "use it or lose it" and I also remember reading articles and watching documentaries about faster brain shrinkage when not used than when actively used. I hope bridge playing will stop/delay the onset of Alzheimer's.

Bridge playing helps people to socialise and make friends. I have made so many friends through playing in local clubs and going on bridge holidays. I cannot imagine life without bridge especially during the lockdown. The online bridge has helped me stay connected with people worldwide and continue to exercise my brains. It has kept my sanity. (A)

I found that starting playing bridge again after many years has helped with getting me to be more organised, keep to my time contracts, getting space awareness enhanced and from the social side I have really enjoyed meeting other likeminded people. With the virus situation and your online bridge that you organised, the list of benefits can go on and on. Keeping in touch, feeling less isolated, filling in time. (L)

I decided to learn to play bridge in 2012. My health was in decline - in particular, cognitive function was affected - and I realised retirement was imminent. My work, following my husband's death and the children leaving home, had become my life and the hole left by retirement was enormous. Bridge has proved a great replacement. It provides mental challenge, motivation, good company, and structure to the week. (C)

I have found bridge to be an absolute lifeline since the death of my husband. I had appreciated the mental and social benefits before but in bereavement those benefits have meant even more to me. I think that in times of anxiety, stress, grief, and coronavirus having a routine is vital. Making a commitment to play regularly with a partner is one way of providing some routine. Being a part of a community is also important, as was very evident at Rodger O'Reilly's funeral. In playing, of course,

one has to concentrate and as well as stimulating the brain it does break the cycle of repetitive anxious thoughts and the self-absorption that can so easily develop when living alone. I do have interests other than bridge!!! Nevertheless, I do feel that bridge is essential for my mental wellbeing. Socially, as a bonus I have made some lovely friendships. (P)

I moved to the area from the Midlands 11 months ago, not knowing many people locally, and started to come to the Hitchin Bridge Club in October last year.

Although I have played bridge at a basic level on and off for many years, I have found it to be stimulating and thought provoking to start to learn to play at a much more advanced level. It is a game that tests the memory and gives scope for developing and to put into practice strategies to succeed. There also seem to be almost limitless ways to learn, work on and improve the way you play and interact with a number of different partners. For someone who has now retired it is great to have an opportunity to develop new skills and to exercise the brain cells.

I have got to know a number of people in the area who I now count as good friends. I was fortunate to join the club some months before the lockdown, to start to get to know people in the club and to have the chance to access some of the very good training sessions, led by Richard Jones, before the coronavirus lockdown got in the way. The online bridge sessions available, both those organised as tournaments by the club and social relaxed games between members of the club, have been a real help in getting through the social isolation that could otherwise have been felt during this difficult time. They have helped me to get to know club members better and to extend the range of people from the club that I now interact with. (A)

Learning to play was a great opportunity to try something new, learn a skill, have fun and keep my brain ticking over. Having organised lessons not only made this easier than trying from a book or website, but also gives an opportunity to make friends and realising there are other people equally as stumped as I was at first is an encouragement to keep going. It is also a lifelong learning opportunity and an ongoing challenge; I am still in the valley looking up at first base camp while the distant summit is hidden in the clouds - but another benefit is that you can play at whatever level suits the individual, socially or in a more competitive environment.

Through the club and the lessons, I have made some real friends (and will no doubt make more) and have a widened social group of friendly diverse people with a shared interest. This is also true of other people I meet or already know, where bridge has become another link or topic of conversation.

It is also a relatively cheap pastime, so is open to a wide range of people on different incomes. (C)