

Aging and Keeping Your Memory Sharp

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As we get older, changes occur in all parts of our bodies, including our brain. Neuroplasticity and cognitive reserve support our brain's ability to tolerate and adapt to change. Certain activities keep your mind sharp. Staying physically and mentally active, enjoying a healthy nutritious diet, regular exercise and continued social engagement with family, friends, and community are supportive of good memory maintenance.

Cognitive function includes memory, reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. Occasional memory lapses are normal and do occur in all ages. Some forgetfulness in older age is normal. Many elderly amplify their memory lapse due to worry and underlying fear of Alzheimer's dementia. For most elderly people dire cognitive decline is not a normal part of aging. Consistent social participation in activities such as volunteering or charity work, attending educational courses, playing an instrument, regularly assisting family, friends, or neighbors, involvement in a sports or social club, religious, political, or community organizations, is associated with better cognitive performance for both men and women.

If you believe deterioration is inevitable, you are not likely to make any effort to halt it.^[5] As a society, we generally worry too much about everything. Worry puts extra, unnecessary stress on the mind, body, and spirit. We need to worry less about what we cannot control and work on those things in our lives that we are able to make positive changes in. We need to enjoy our lives and relationships and not give ourselves over to worrying about our aging minds and bodies. There is a slowing down that occurs with aging. You cannot run, jump, think, or react as quickly as you use to. With the onset of advanced age, higher level tasks become increasingly difficult.

Risk factors implicated in age-related cognitive decline include diabetes, obesity, smoking, atherosclerosis, high blood pressure, and apolipoprotein E4 genes (often associated with Alzheimer's disease). What is bad for the heart is also bad for the brain. Cardiovascular disease is also risk factor for cognitive decline. Avoiding illness and disease can help save your cognitive As much as possible you want to

minimize your risk for cognitive decline. If your perception, reasoning and thinking skills suffer from debility, your memory will be negatively affected.

Keeping Your Memory Sharp

Memory retrieval is a process and skill, where the more you use it (practice), the better you become at it. Remembering or recalling something entails a three-step process of information acquisition, storage, and retrieval. There are several things you can do to assist and/or improve your memory. Attentive use of your senses, employment of specific, helpful memory enhancing techniques and memory practices can succor memory and boost cognition. Memory work requires a focused and sustained attention. Bourne and Healy^[2] note, “Just as it can be difficult to find a book in the library, it can be difficult to find information stored in your mind.” Is the information stored in your memory and you just can’t retrieve it or was the information acquisition shallow such that it was never stored in your memory. Regularly practicing the memory retrieval will enable you to do it more quickly, accurately and efficiently.

Memory Practices

- Make “to do” lists, and use notes and calendars as memory aids.
- Meditation techniques can be used to train the mind that tends to wander. Using the practice of meditation, you can train yourself to stay mindfully focused on being attentive to the task at hand, whether it is actively engaging a person so that you remember his/her name in a later encounter, or learning a new language, a new music score, or even a new pattern of behavior.
- Word, face associations can provide you with clues to remembering that person later on. According to the National Institute on Aging, some people find they remember things better if they mentally connect them to other meaningful things, such as a familiar name, song, book, or a TV show.
- Use mnemonics. Mnemonics are prompts, cues, and memory aids, such as rhymes or limericks that serve as reminders.
- Know your zone of learnability. The average person’s memory is limited to 7 ± 2 whether a string of numbers or letters. Space your learning time and amount of learning material—pace yourself.

- When adding new material to what you already know, do so in measured—small doses at any one time. Make sure the newly added material is neither easy nor too difficult.
- Repetition and periodic testing yourself on what you know can help you learn new things and commit them to memory. The more you practice, the better you will become at a particular skill or knowing what you know.
- Mentally practice in your head by silently thinking about the steps you perform in learning a new skill.
- To learn something new and difficult, study at a level that is intense, deep, and where the material learned becomes meaningful. This process creates memory connections and effective retrieval paths that can be called upon later on. One important way to process information at a deep level, and thus to facilitate its retention, is to try generating the information yourself.^[4]

Move from shallow learning to deep learning by studying material at its most meaningful level. Increase the depth of your practice. For deeper processing and better retention of the material: mentally consider the material to be learned by thoughtfully considering related concepts and associations; Make strategic use of what you already know; Use keywords or word associations; Try grouping or chunk information together for faster learning; Move beyond just reading information and try generating the information; Minimize interference, confusion, and distractions when attempting to memorize information. Protect your memory against the decay of time by using what you have learned. Periodically test yourself.

Sensory Aids

Use of sensory aids can help stimulate the memory. Your five senses (hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching or feeling) can rouse and encourage memory.

- Visual: seeing, or sight cues from pictures or movies can serve to trigger memories, names, and events.
- Audio: music and sounds such as a special person's voice, environmental elements such as wind, rain, waves, birds chirping, dog barking, leaves rustling, fan humming, etcetera can trigger remote memories.

- Aroma: many types of scents (fragrance, baked goods, spices, fresh cut grass, forest pine, etc.) influence memory and cognitions.
- Palate: the sensory of taste is your ability to discriminate between flavors, distinguish the mouth feel of food, and savor food.
- Touch: sensitivity or feelings and bodily sensations can be an experience unto itself, influence other contemporaneous experiences, or bring previous experiences to mind.

Final Note

As a final point, engage in proactive, healthy behaviors. Be nutrition-wise. Eat ample vegetables and fruit, lean-clean protein, and wholesome grains and nuts. Stay hydrated, drinking clear-clean water daily. Do not sit for hours on end. Get up and move around. Go outdoors, take a walk and get some fresh air. Be exercise-wise and get vigorous, preplanned, regularly scheduled exercise that is doctor approved and under the guidance of a certified geriatric fitness trainer. And remember, mental stimulation through ongoing, positive interactions with family, friends, and community participation is the single most important aspect of memory maintenance and enhancement.

Our brains do change over time. It is helpful for the elderly, their caregivers, and family to be able to distinguish between normal changes and those that require some form of medical or psychological attention.^[1] The results of numerous studies clearly show that many kinds of social involvement enhance cognitive functions. In particular the continuation of occupational activities helps the aging person maintain or enhance cognitive functioning.^[3] A satisfying, active lifestyle buffers against many aging-related declines in life performance. Social-wise engagements keep a sparkle in your eye, a smile on your face, and an activated brain.

Reference

1. American Psychological Association (n.d.). Memory and aging.
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5. McPherson, F. (n.d.). Memory in normal aging. <http://www.mempowered.com/aging/normal>