

ENHANCING YOUR BRAIN, STAYING SHARP AS YOU AGE

By Irene Peters, MN, RN, Geriatric Clinical Nurse Specialist, Overlake Hospital Medical Center

Our bodies and our brains change as a normal part of the aging process. You may have noticed that recall and memory are slower (i.e., “What was her name?” or “Where did I leave my keys?”). Many people express frustration and struggle with these signs of aging. Some recent research has identified a number of ways we can counteract this natural slowdown and stay mentally sharp as we age. It turns out that the most effective steps one can take to help retain brain function are through lifestyle changes most people can adopt.

One of the best ways to keep your brain stimulated and in top form is through new learning. It sounds simple on the surface. But how much and what kind of learning is enough? Actually, almost any kind of new learning engages our brains, forces us to concentrate

HELPFUL WEB SITES

www.nia.nih.gov
www.aarp.org
www.overlakehospital.org/SeniorCare

more fully and helps us stay sharp. Geriatric experts are advising aging adults to learn something new every year. By this they mean something that will need to be worked on and practiced over time, such as learning a new language, learning the game of golf, bridge or chess, or learning to use a computer or cell phone, if you’ve never used one.

As human beings, we often stay with what’s familiar to us. We look for our comfort zones. This natural tendency can keep us from using our brain power as we gravitate toward the same activities we’ve already mastered, repeated behaviors and habitual routines. But our brains need stimulation to stay active, establish new connections to our existing knowledge and keep those synapses firing.

Even familiar activities can be altered slightly and turned into new learning experiences. I suggest you try to vary your schedule or routine to keep from moving through your day on autopilot. Drive a different way to the grocery store, brush your teeth with the opposite hand or attend a social event that you’ve never gone to before. You’ll provide your brain with more “exercise” by breaking established routines. Even simple activities force us to focus on the task at hand and activate more parts of our brain without relying on habit or memory.

An important consideration in staying mentally sharp is getting regular exercise. In fact, exercise has many benefits for our overall well-being. Studies suggest that exercise may reduce cognitive decline due to the increased production of chemicals that protect brain cells. Exercise releases the body’s natural endorphins that will help you feel better. I recommend that people exercise at least 30 minutes every day. Exercise also helps reduce stress, maintain strength and stamina to

ensure you’ll stay fit, prevent falling and maintain better overall health.

Another way to stay mentally fit is to develop and maintain an active social network. Interpersonal relationships are complex and experts have found that interacting with other people can be just the kind of stimulus that aging brains need to function best. Older age can be a difficult time as we lose life partners, family and friends. Keeping close social ties can help one avoid isolation and depression. Staying socially engaged provides support, enhances emotional well-being and brings value and meaning to our lives.

Interacting with others also helps keep us alert, aware and more likely to try new things and continue to maintain a rich and well-rounded life. There is considerable research that shows people with strong social networks live longer and are physically healthier than those who are isolated.

It’s important to keep adding to your circle of friends. I often recommend to seniors that they make at least one new friend each year. This requires effort, and asks people to move outside of their comfort zones, but the rewards can be tremendous and long-lasting.

The following are a number of ways that can help you stay mentally sharp throughout older adulthood by maintaining supportive relationships, keeping active and continuing to acquire knowledge and skills.

- Join a walking or biking club.
- Volunteer at a local school, hospital or nonprofit organization.
- Take a class and learn a new skill, sport or hobby.
- Pursue social pastimes, such as dancing, lecture programs, travel and outings with friends.
- Link up with local organizations—community centers, senior centers, libraries—that offer regular social events, exercise groups and other opportunities.
- Find others who share your interests and passions by joining a club or religious group.



JP can take care of all your computer & network troubleshooting needs at very competitive rates.

specializing in:

- Professional Computer Repair & Upgrades
- Custom Builds and Consulting
- Networking

JP Denham
425.205.3700
jpdenham@gmail.com