

Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time



Staying sharp through learning activities

We've all done it—misplaced our car keys, blanked on someone's name or forgotten our PIN. Such occasional memory lapses are common; especially as we get older. The good news is that we can improve our memories and strengthen our cognitive functions. How? The good old fashioned way.

Like the rest of your body, your brain requires regular exercise to stay in tip-top shape—no matter what your age. Our brain constantly improves or declines, depending on how we use it. If it's exercised regularly, it stays sharp and may even get sharper. In fact, regular physical and mental exercise has been shown to be the best defense against age-related mental decline.

Your mind consists of five main functions:

1. **Memory**—plays a crucial role in all mental activities, including reading, reasoning and calculation.
2. **Attention**—enables you to maintain concentration and focus despite distractions.
3. **Language**—the ability to recognize, remember and understand words.
4. **Visual-spatial**—the skills to analyze visual information so you can function within a three-dimensional environment.
5. **Executive function**—logic and reasoning skills that allow you to make decisions, think things through and understand the consequences of your actions.

Keeping your brain in shape

It's important to challenge, stimulate and effectively exercise all five areas to stay mentally healthy and fit. Here are some suggestions:

- Read a book.** It doesn't matter what genre you prefer—reading exercises your brain and improves your vocabulary.
- Take a night course.** This doesn't have to be anything that involves a lot of homework, tests and seminars. Sign up for a cooking class, tai chi, or anything else that interests you. Just as long as you're learning something new and memorizing new information.
- Learn a language.** Learning languages stimulates the frontal lobes—the part of the brain that most often fades over the years. Learning languages also causes other parts of the brain to grow, such as the hippocampus—responsible for the development of new knowledge, orientation in space and the fixing of short-term memory into long-term memory.

-  **Make music.** Pull out your old guitar or sign up for piano lessons. If you already play an instrument, learn a new one. Reading music provides mental stimulation and playing an instrument requires powers of recall as well as concentration to maintain tune and tempo with both your right and left hands—a real workout for the brain.
-  **Do a daily crossword puzzle or Sudoku.** Two more great ways to strengthen your mental skills and creative thinking.
-  **Take up a new hobby.** Hobbies that require hand-eye coordination and a certain amount of mental calculation stimulate your visual and spatial abilities. So if you've ever wanted to take up woodworking or knitting, now is the time.

Keeping kids sharp

There are many ways parents and children can learn together by participating in fun learning activities. For example:

-  **Change it up.** Instead of reading to your children before bed, ask them to read to you every once in a while.
-  **Play games.** Have regular game nights where the entire family plays cards or board games. You'll all expand your powers of recall, test your mathematical skills and employ your strategic abilities and logic. If your children are older, teach them chess and play frequently.
-  **Do crafts together.** Most children love crafts so exercise their hand-eye coordination, calculation and visual and spatial abilities by sewing, knitting, building models and cooking together.
-  **Shoot some hoops.** Play sports, especially those that involve hand-eye coordination and visual and spatial skills. Some examples include golf, tennis and basketball.

Give your brain a break

It's easy to blame age, but there are many other things can affect the brain. Medication, lack of sleep, alcohol, tobacco or drug use, depression and stress are the usual culprits. Or it just may be that your head is jammed with too much information. You may be preoccupied with what you've got to do at work that day, what to pick up for dinner on the way home and what each member of the family have scheduled that night. So try and take some time for yourself and have fun exercising your brain.



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