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The Grandparent

A NEWSLETTER FOR AND BY GRANDPARENTS

Newsletter #84 – January 2019

How to Keep Your Brain Fit as You Get Older

There are many ways to keep our cognitive skills strong and reduce the risk of dementia as we age

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON WWW.MINDFUL.ORG BY KARIN EVANS 24 SEPTEMBER 2018



If you are of a certain age, it's probably happened to you: You walk into a room and forget what you came for. You misplace your car keys. Again. And although you try and try to remember the name of that acquaintance in front of you, your mind goes blank.

Oh no, you think. Is this a sign of Alzheimer's? Am I losing my brainpower?

If you have such concerns, you're not alone. A recent survey by the Alzheimer's Association showed that 60 percent of people worldwide believe—incorrectly—that Alzheimer's is an inevitable part of aging, a worry second only to getting cancer. The good news is that there is more information than ever available these days about staving off mental decline and staying sharp into your twilight years.

There's so much research out there, in fact, that it would be hard to wade through it all. That's what makes *Ageless Brain: Think Faster, Remember More, and Stay Sharper by Lowering Your Brain Age* so useful. It offers a practical, and solid guide to keeping your brain young, while distilling the latest findings

from research on nutrition, physical and mental exercise, stress reduction, memory issues: What's Normal, What's Not. "Not all memory lapses spell trouble," something readers may find especially reassuring.

There are ways to distinguish normal, age-related memory glitches from dementia or Alzheimer's: If you find yourself unable to recall the details of an event or conversation from a year ago, that's normal; but if you find yourself unable to remember the details from an event or conversation from last week, that's reason to check with your doctor.

The three primary risk factors for brain decline:

- Advancing age. (By age 85, one-third of us will experience some cognitive decline.)
- A family history of Alzheimer's.
- A handful of extremely rare inherited genes.

Tips for sharpening your brain

Challenge yourself. One especially useful idea is to get out of your comfort zone by tackling something new, even though you might feel a bit befuddled at first. That sense of befuddlement actually challenges the brain to stretch, say the authors. "The comfort zone is where the brain turns to mush." One especially useful idea is to get out of your comfort zone by tackling something new, even though you might feel a bit befuddled at first.

"Retire to something, not from something." Here, the editors offer an interesting observation: "Sadly, though early retirement may seem like paradise, it's hell on the brain. That's because our work is often one of the most consistently stimulating things we

do.” In fact, when researchers studied civil servants in Britain 14 years before and after their retirement, they found that retirement presaged a decline in their short-term ability to recall words.

Learn something new every day. That’ll build up your cognitive reserves. The editors refer to a fascinating study of London cab drivers, who are all required to pass a test that involves memorizing a city map of 25,000 streets and 20,000 landmarks. According to brain scans, the drivers who had passed that test had actually reshaped a key region of their brains, strengthening cognitive function.

Stay connected to others. Your brain gets a workout when you interact with other people. In one study, elderly people who had the least social connection at the beginning of the experiment experienced twice

as much memory loss over six years compared to those who had the highest levels of social connection. “Widen your social circle,” say the authors. “In short, think of your brain as a puppy—both need human connection and something to chew on.”

Find your balance. Studies have shown that people who can’t stand on one leg for more than 20 seconds are more likely to have damage to small blood vessels in the brain, such as tiny bleeds or ministrokes. If you miss the mark, the book offers exercises that can help with balance, as well as the advice to try a tai chi class. Why? Because a study of tai chi practitioners in their late 60s found that their stability was particularly strong—in the 90th percentile of the American Fitness Standards.

Now, where did I put my sneakers?.....

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