



Boost Your Brain Power!

By Cathy Richards

Brain health and mental sharpness are not just a concern for older adults. As with physical fitness, it is never too early or too late to prioritize brain fitness. Starting early is important for improving mental performance markers such as intellectual ability, mental clarity, processing speed, both short-term and long-term memory, and reducing the risk of diseases such as Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

Even later in life, you haven't missed your chance to improve brain function. The term neuroplasticity is the capacity of the brain to reorganize itself and create new neural pathways. The brain is an amazing organ which indeed retains neuroplasticity throughout life—it grows and responds to stimuli at any age, just as your muscles adapt to physical training. It used to be commonly thought that brain functions were destined to steadily decline with age, but that does not have to be the case. Change, renewal, and improvement are possible after brain injury, disease, or advanced age.

Many people do experience changes in brain function as they age. Almost 40% of people over the age of 65 experience some memory loss. Mild cognitive changes, however, are different than Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, which are diseases. Some estimates predict that the number of Americans over the age of 65 with Alzheimer's disease could more than triple from 5 million to 16 million by the year 2050! As with physical health, the increased prevalence of impairments in brain health are largely due to *lifestyle* factors—the *same ones* that harm our physical health; things like diet, exercise, sleep, stress, and much more.

Strategies to Sharpen Your Brain

The “use it or lose it” principle applies to the mind as well as the body and there are many things we can do to improve our brain function throughout our lives.

1. Physical Exercise

*The number one way to make your brain sharper is **physical exercise!*** This is an important point to take to heart because it's a common misconception that the best way to improve brain function is through brain exercises.

Exercise increases blood flow to the brain and reduces your risk of dementia by 30-40%. What a huge incentive alone to exercise! Exercise also reduces your risk of depression and high cholesterol which are both also linked to dementia. Strength training has been shown to improve memory along with a multitude of other benefits.



2. Physical Exercise and Brain Exercise at the Same Time

There are some studies that show that asking the brain to think *while* performing physical exercise provides a double stimulus for powerful brain function improvement. Examples of this would be a dance class where you need to remember the steps while you are moving as opposed to walking or riding a stationary bike that does not require any thinking.

3. Brain Exercises

There is definitely a place for brain exercises such as crossword puzzles, Sudoku, online memory games and specific brain fitness exercises. Practice challenging your brain on a regular basis!

4. Nutrition: The Superfoods!

The “Superfoods” are foods that I consider powerful for multiple purposes – reducing our risk of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, helping us lose weight, giving us more energy, and...improving our brain function! In addition, it’s important to eat a high fiber, low fat, and low cholesterol diet for a healthy brain, as high cholesterol is a risk factor for dementia.

Here are the “Superfoods”:

Tomatoes	Broccoli	Sweet Potatoes
Avocado	Pumpkin	Beans
Lentils	Spinach	Whole Grains
Edamame	Winter Squashes	Nuts and Seeds
Leafy greens	Flax Seed	Yogurt
Salmon	Quinoa	Barley

5. Sleep

During sleep, the flow of cerebrospinal fluid in the brain increases dramatically, washing away harmful toxins, namely a waste protein called beta-amyloid, that creates plaques in the brain linked to Alzheimer’s. Therefore, getting enough sleep can reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s. Sleep is vital for tissue repair, rejuvenation, and memory retention!

6. Challenging Your Brain and Learning Something New

Whether it’s a new language, a musical instrument, or a class on art or history, embracing the challenge (and frustration) of learning something new has a remarkable benefit to the brain. It’s easy to think classes are in the past once you have surpassed school-age, but there are many exciting models and opportunities for adult education. Give some thought to something you’ve always wanted to learn about and jump in!

7. Continually Change Your Routine

The brain's pathways can resemble a well-worn path through a grassy field when you do the same things the same way all the time. Changing your daily routine by driving a different route to work or brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand will force your brain to create new nerve connections and new pathways. New nerve pathways are brain growth!

8. Stress Reduction

When we are under stress, the body secretes excess amounts of cortisol and other stress hormones. Cortisol has been shown to damage the hippocampus, which is the memory center of the brain. This is especially significant for older adults since the size of the hippocampus reduces in older age by as much as 20%. It's easy to think stress is just part of life or to tell yourself you'll relax after whatever stressful event is going on in your life is over. The trouble is that once one situation resolves, there's usually something else on its heels. The key is to learn strategies for managing stress day to day and especially during the storms of life. I'll cover that in an upcoming section of this book.

9. Social Connections

Relationships and social stimulation are good for the brain. Challenge yourself to branch out socially and take some risks. The larger and more complex our social networks, the larger the amygdala becomes (which plays a major role in behavior and motivation). Also, when we hug someone or experience other meaningful human touch, it releases the hormone oxytocin, which suppresses the release of cortisol (the hormone that damages the brain). Hug therapy for brain fitness sounds amazing!

10. Purpose

What's your reason for getting up in the morning? What excites you? Oftentimes, we hear about people who have cognitive decline after retiring because they lose their purpose and stimulation of their brain and social lives. Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. Many people are using their retirement years for new adventures. Regardless of your age, why not reflect on how your daily life matches up with a greater sense of purpose and if there's a gap, give some thought to what would excite you!

11. Variety, Surprise, and Zeal

When the body is presented with an overload in an exercise setting, it adapts and grows to meet the challenge placed upon it. The brain is the same. Look for ways to inject your daily life with variety, surprise, and zeal for new things to keep your brain guessing.

12. Healthy Hearing

Hearing is a very important part of the five senses. When you experience hearing loss, the brain is robbed of important stimulation on an ongoing basis, resulting in less opportunity for growth. The link between hearing loss and dementia is significant. With each 10-decibel loss of hearing, dementia risk increases by 20%. Mild hearing loss doubles the risk of dementia. Moderate hearing loss triples the risk, and severe hearing loss increases the risk of dementia five times!

There are many ways to boost your brain power! Try one today!

Come Visit Me!

Website: <http://www.CathyRichards.net>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/InspiringVitality>

Instagram: <http://www.Instagram.com/InspiringVitality>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/c/CathyRichards>

Book: <https://www.amazon.com/BOOM-Steps-Longer-Healthier-Life/dp/0976780011>